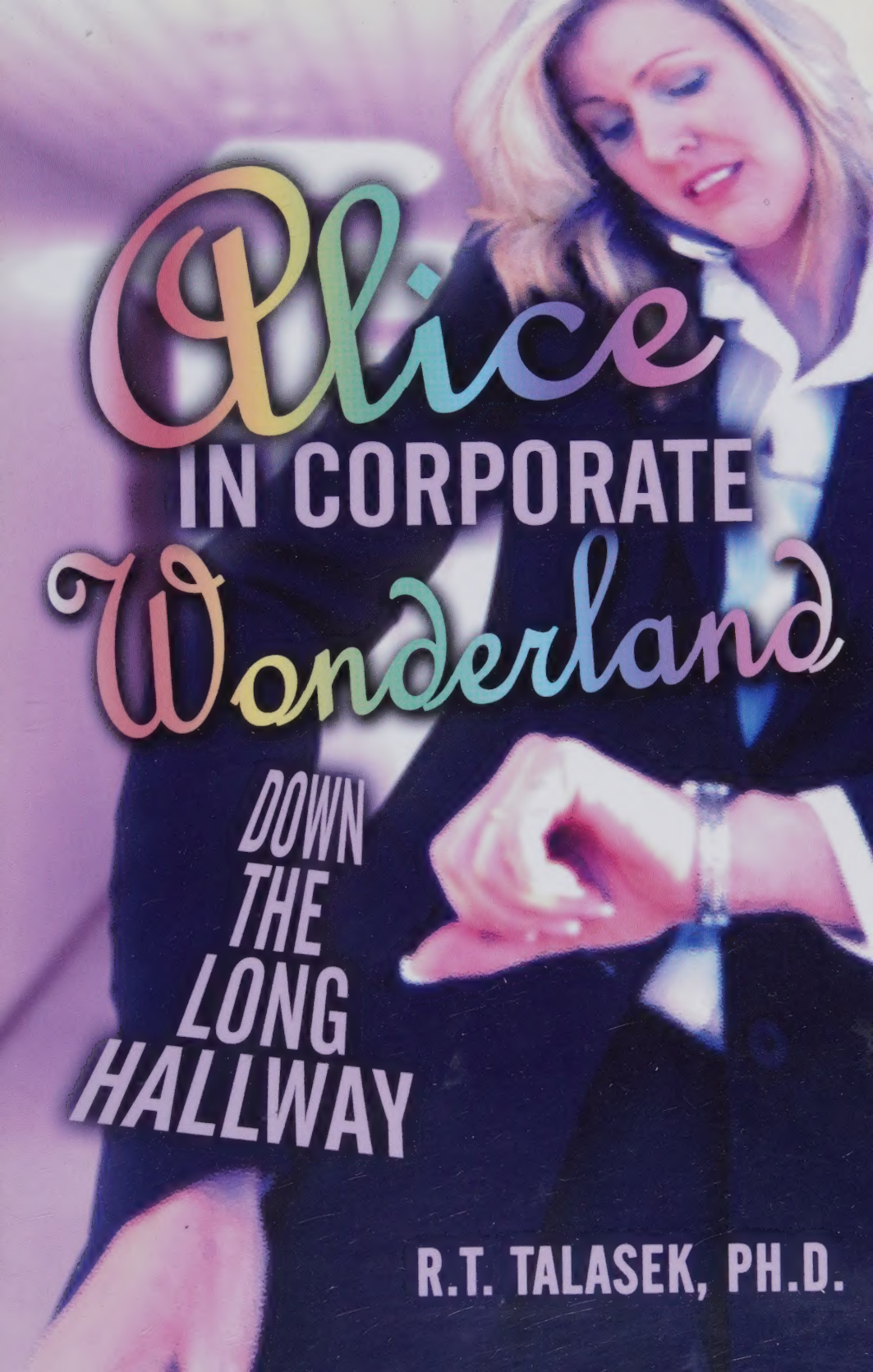
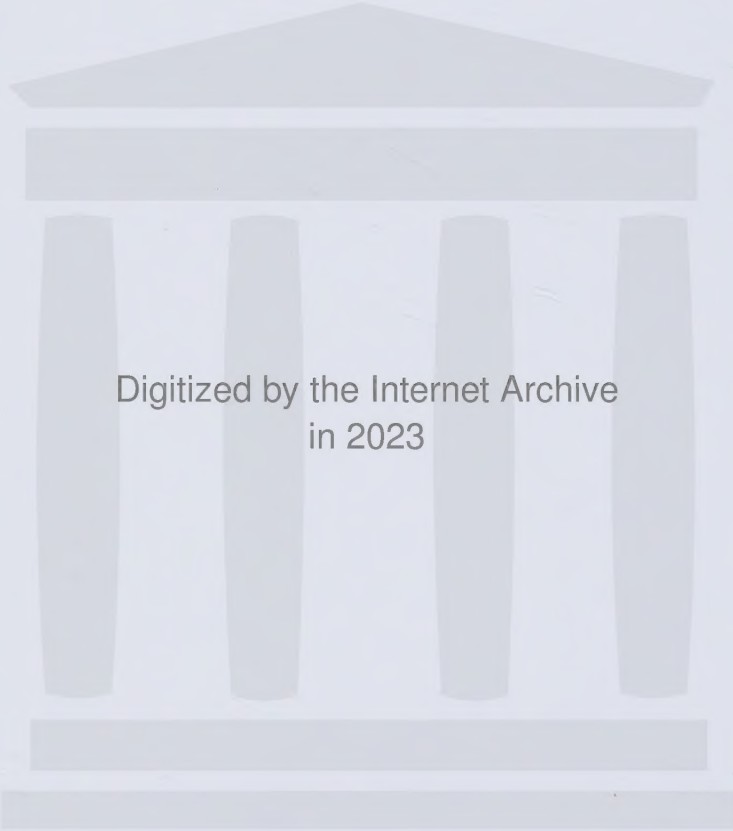


A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark business suit and a white shirt, is shown from the chest up. She is holding a mobile phone to her ear with her right hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and pink gradient.

Rlice IN CORPORATE *Wonderland*

**DOWN
THE
LONG
HALLWAY**

R.T. TALASEK, PH.D.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023

Alice in Corporate & Wonderland: & DOWN THE LONG HALLWAY

R.T. Talasek, Ph.D.



PublishAmerica
Baltimore

© 2005 by Robert Talasek.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine or journal.

First printing

At the specific preference of the author, PublishAmerica allowed this work to remain exactly as the author intended, verbatim, without editorial input.

ISBN: 1-4137-9681-1 (softcover)

ISBN: 978-1-4489-6773-5 (hardcover)

PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP

www.publishamerica.com

Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Prologue	7
I. Down the Long Hallway	9
II. Lost at Wonderland, Inc.	16
III. The Quality Circle	23
IV. Job's Not Done Till the Paperwork Is Finished	31
V. The Mentor	37
VI. Alice Meets the Boss	45
VII. The CFO's Office	52
VIII. The Golf Game	58
IX. Battle of the B-Schools	65
X. MT's Story—Dance of the General Manager	69
XI. The Business Review	73
XII. The End of a Dream	79
References	81

Prologue

If you read books the way I often do, you'll probably never see this. Hopefully you're smarter than I am, and I can take a few words to introduce this work, and perhaps clarify some aspects. Let me start with a little history.

This story is loosely based on the famous work by Lewis Carroll, the pen name for Charles Ludwig Dodgson. Dodgson, a prominent mathematician in the nineteenth century, published several exciting works, including *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*. I know that you are all fascinated by this, and will run out and buy multiple copies of *Euclid*. Dodgson never publicly acknowledged the works by Carroll, so hopefully he won't take offense to what I have done to his true classic. There will be no parody based on his *Euclid* work written by me. On the other hand, Carroll might see the symmetry in the author of the fascinating dissertation *The Analysis of Inorganic Gases in Air by Gas Chromatography/Mass Spectrometry* using his work as the basis of a story of the modern global corporation.

I stress that the following chapters are loosely based on the "real" story of Alice. After all, Carroll's work is almost 150 years old. Hopefully you will realize, however, that the similarities are frightening, with some allowances for the passage of time and change of venue. The story also draws from my 25 years in the corporate world. Having said that, I should state that ALL CHARACTERS ARE

FICTICIOUS. However, I'd be surprised if everyone that reads this book doesn't find something of themselves or someone they know in one or more of the characters. All the characters and situations are loosely based on Carroll's characters, with occasional lapses into other children's stories, movies, and rock and roll.

I'd love to be able to thank everyone that has helped me develop into the twisted little monkey that I am today, but I'm afraid that I would forget someone, so I'll refrain. If you're reading this, you know who you are. Thanks a million. I can't, however, go without mentioning my wife and my parents. I have to make sure you know that I turned out this way in spite of their best efforts. Seriously, my wife Carolyn (a noted consultant in her own right) has put in countless hours in helping me take the technologist out of what is hopefully a fun book. Thanks SB. Mom and Dad are Mom and Dad, enough said.

"Welcome back my friends, to the show that never ends, we're so glad you could attend, come inside, come inside..."¹

I. Down the Long Hallway

“The cost of a debt instrument is the present value of the future money receipts promised in the promissory note, measured in terms of the interest rates set at the time of agreement.” Alice reads the statement for the fourth time, gaining no more insight than the first. Not only is accounting boring, but people who write accounting books speak in a language that Alice is sure isn’t English. The only part of accounting that Alice enjoys is “debits on the left, credits on the right” to which she always mentally adds ‘stand up, sit down, fight, fight, fight...’ (Once a cheerleader, always a cheerleader.) Although she is sure her professor wouldn’t appreciate it, she never forgets this key principle. Now FIFO, LIFO, weighted average are other matters...

Alice studies the dust in the sunlight sparkling through the window, the bright light bringing her back from the daydream she has drifted into. At first, it reminds her that her exam will be soon, and she’s nowhere near ready. She hasn’t even showered or changed clothes yet. As her mind wanders back to the sunbeams again (it often does), it reminds her more pleasantly of snowflakes in the mountains. Her thoughts drift off to the cold crisp air on her face as she’s skiing in the Alps, her shoulder-length blond hair flowing behind her as she gracefully carves her way down the mountain. She loves to ski, but she really loves the ski trips and the new clothes that come before their family’s annual trip to their Chateau. Besides, she looks great in a

sweater. The rustling papers of her roommate on the other side of their room startle her back to reality, i.e., accounting. She hates accounting with a passion bordering on anarchy. Of course, she really just hates business school.

"This stuff is so boring," pouts Alice. At this moment, she isn't sure why she is bothering with school at all.

"It's not good for a business major to be bored with accounting, Alice," her roommate Dorothy chides. Her roommate is always the practical one. Maybe it's because she's a country girl. Dorothy is also an attractive young lady, but not as striking as Alice. Alice always gets most of the attention from the boys when they go out together. That's one of the things Alice likes about her roommate. She hears her roommate continue the lecture, "You're going to be using it for years when you go to work in the real world, so you'd better get used to it. Do you know how many people would feel lucky just to be going to an Ivy League school?"

The real world. Alice wonders again why she is bothering, an internal struggle she has almost daily. Her dad would and could easily support her, and she could spend her time 'studying' in Europe until she met the right gentleman. Daddy would be OK with that. Then she remembers her desire to be independent, to show the world that she could do anything her brothers could do. It is no longer just a man's world, and part of it is hers to claim. She never thought it would be so much hard work, though. Everyone else seems to be able to do it effortlessly.

Back to accounting again. She is just so mentally exhausted; she can't focus, especially on accounting. Marketing, or macroeconomics, would perhaps keep her interest, but not accounting. At least other subjects are easier for Alice to relate to the real world, especially with the lively debates in her house about what the stock market is going to do. She thinks of the family at the dinner table, and as usual, they quickly develop the appearance of animals, namely bulls and bears. It is a fun little mental game she has played with herself since she was a small girl.

Accounting! Alice tries to return to the subject at hand. She

shouldn't have waited to the last minute to study, but that's the way it always seems to happen. She can barely keep her blue eyes open. Staying up all night to party is one thing, but studying seems to make her so much more drained. Besides, after partying is glorious sleep until afternoon, not an exam. Crashing all day irritates Daddy, but she is still his little princess anyway. He is wrapped around her little finger, and they both know it. It is one of those symbiotic relationships she studied in undergrad psychology.

Alice considers playing tic-tac-toe with herself, but thinks it's not worth the effort, even more futile than playing against someone else. She doodles aimlessly; doing anything she can to avoid studying or dozing off. Alice sighs again, and lays her head down on her book. She's got an exam in two hours, and needs to look at three more chapters. It feels wonderful to rest her eyes, just for a minute, but that minute turns into sleep...

Suddenly Alice reawakens and she is startled to see an older woman dressed in a white linen suit, matching white shoes and hose, towering over the diminutive Alice. *Linen before Easter, how gauche*, Alice thinks with some disdain. The woman's long white hair is pulled into pigtails, although peculiarly far toward the front of her head, hanging over her ears. Complete with pink eyes, she is a very intimidating but curious-looking woman. The woman appears exceedingly stressed, and continually looks at her watch as she wriggles and twitches her nose. The woman's cell phone rings and she answers it, chattering nervously, as she pulls out her PDA and writes frantically. Alice wonders how this lady got into her apartment when she notices that they are actually in the enormous lobby of what appears to be a large industrial building. The marble floors and expensive but traditional wood and leather furniture remind her of a legal office lobby on steroids. An expansive atrium contains the traditional variety of office plants, and they appear well maintained.

People hurriedly rush through the lobby, whether through the building exit or what appears to be the entrance to rest of the building. They rarely acknowledge the receptionist behind a large cherry

receptionist desk, but head directly through a doorway which Alice surmises leads into the rest of the building. Most appear to have magnetic security badges that allow them unassisted access, but two people stand at the receptionist desk, apparently trying to make contact with someone in the building to allow them passage into the inner sanctum.

Alice notices her own attire, which has changed dramatically from the jeans and spaghetti-strap top that she had on what seemed moments ago. She has on a tailored blue wool blend business suit, but with the distinctive lines of Anne Taylor. Her skirt is slightly shorter than those of others in the lobby, but not inappropriately so. *Just enough to get a little attention from the male passers-by*, thinks Alice. The fitted jacket covers a freshly-starched white shirt. Matching Bruno Magli pumps, and a Coach folio completes the ensemble. Her blond hair is recently styled, as opposed to the pony tail that was there only a moment ago. The look is a little conservative for her taste, but definitely appropriate for the occasion. Daddy has always taught her to dress appropriately for the occasion. Although their ideas of appropriate usually clash, she thinks he would approve in this instance. *Why am I here? Do I work here? What is my job? And who is this woman whose nose twitches as she talks?* thinks Alice silently.

The woman ends her cell phone conversation and turns her attention to Alice. "There you are, don't you realize how late we are!" The woman checks her PDA again. "We must go now!" Alice hears some faintly familiar tune playing in the background. She can't place it at first, because it's not the original recording but rather a version appropriate for elevators. She finally associates it with a song that she's heard on Daddy's classic rock station, she thinks performed by Jefferson Airplane.

Alice realizes that she is beginning to imagine this person resembling a rabbit, with her floppy 'hair ears', stark white outfit, and pale skin. She could swear only moments ago that she was just a poorly-dressed, middle-aged woman. *A rabbit with a bad suit and hair do*, she inserts mentally. She is, of course a polite person, as she was taught to be in prep school, so she doesn't comment, but she can't help

staring. She hopes she hasn't been obvious in her mental amusement at her companion's appearance. Alice concludes it's time to find out what all this is about. "Who are you, and what are we late for?" Alice questions in a rather abrupt fashion, suddenly forgetting her manners.

"I'm the senior assistant to the president of course," Alice's companion answers proudly. "People call me WR. And we are late for your first meeting. You don't want to set a bad impression on your first day, do you? First impressions are extremely important, and we value punctuality at Wonderland Industries. Here's your temporary badge." Alice notices that the badge has her name written in ink, but that WR's badge is printed and has her picture on it, surrounded by a yellow border.

"When do I get a permanent badge? Will this badge work on the doors?" she asks, but when she turns towards WR, Alice notices she's already bounding through the door, cell phone in one hand, PDA in the other. Alice scurries to catch up with her before the door shuts, and follows WR down what seems to be an endless hallway, with a maze of closed doors. The hallway is very utilitarian, in stark contrast with the lobby. Industrial grade tile covers the floors, and the sheet-rocked walls are painted eggshell white. Fluorescent lighting completes the ambiance, casting a faint purple haze on the area. The instrumental 60's music continues, but the tune changes.

Alice begins to chatter to WR, who is too busy in a frantic cell phone conversation to acknowledge. "Well I understand that Wonderland is a global company providing enterprise solutions in a multitude of high technology spaces. I also understand that Wonderland promotes diversity in the workplace." She has no idea what she has just said, but she thinks it sounds very similar to the recruiting literature she has seen from other companies. Even dog food companies somehow find a way to tie themselves into 'high technology spaces.' She also knows that every company of this size has an 'affirmative action program', although usually in name only. WR picks up the pace of her gait (or is it hopping) and phone conversation, not even stopping to acknowledge Alice's rhetoric. Alice considers continuing her effort to banter with WR, but decides that WR is otherwise occupied, and is more than

likely not as important as she would like everyone to think.

As she pursues WR, Alice notices an inter-office envelope has fallen to the floor from a nearby mail slot. She has seen these often in Daddy's briefcase, and knows they usually contain things that cause him to react angrily. She stops to pick it up, and determines after a quick examination that this one is empty. *Guess this one has already upset someone today*, she surmises. Alice replaces it on the shelf of the mail area with the other empty envelopes. When she turns back down the hallway, WR is nowhere to be found.

Casually at first, then with a sense of wonder, and finally panic, she looks for WR. The hallways are barren, so there's nothing to block her view. There are no windows in the doors or walls, so WR could have disappeared into any area, and as fast as WR was hopping, it could have been a great distance. *Great*, she thinks to herself, *ten minutes on my new job, and I'm already lost. Looks like I'll miss my meeting with my graduate advisor*. Alice thinks of Dinah (that's what everyone calls her advisor), but can only think of Dinah's calming purr as they discuss Alice's future. Alice relaxes for a second with this thought, and then returns to her current dilemma. She considers going from door to door, knocking and seeing if anyone has seen WR, but that seems undignified, embarrassing, and not the impression she wants to leave on her first day at work. On the other hand, Alice wonders why she would have an appointment with a school advisor on the same day that she is starting a new job. Confusion begins to rear its ugly head.

Finally, it dawns on Alice that WR has given her a badge. She has seen other people use their badges to enter the lobby doorway, and each of these doors appears to have the same type badge reader. Alice tries her badge on the closest badge reader, and then tugs on the door. Nothing. She wonders if it's just this door, and maybe she should try another one, but abandons that approach for now. She doesn't want to appear to be a neophyte wandering aimlessly through the expansive halls, although there appears to be no one to see.

Alice looks around again, and the sense of abandonment and confusion begins to overwhelm her. There is no sign of anyone, and the hallway seems to go on endlessly, windowless wall after windowless

wall, closed door after closed door. Her prison appears more like the bottom of a long canyon than a building, continuing endlessly in both directions, without a hint of where she is. Alice tries to fight it back, but the insecurity of a little girl begins to well up inside her. She can no longer hold it back, and begins to cry softly.

After only a few moments, Alice begins to regain control. *This is ridiculous*, she thinks. *You're not twelve years old; this is the real world, deal with it!* Alice regains her composure and begins looking for someone to help her find her way. For such a long hallway and a busy lobby, there seems to be a sense of abandonment in what is obviously a very large company. The thought also occurs to Alice that, even if she does find someone, WR never told her where they were going. *I don't even know where to ask direction to, or is that to where to ask directions? Oh, my! Now I can't even remember how to use the Queen's English properly!* she frets silently. Daddy has always been very strict about the proper use of the Queen's English, even though they were sixth generation Americans. She can't stand the thought of disappointing Daddy. The feelings of insecurity and uncertainty began to heighten in Alice yet again.

II. Lost at Wonderland, Inc.

Alice hears the opening of a distant doorway, and the faint sound of a vaguely familiar tune. She searches in every direction, and finally sees a group of what appear to be vertically challenged gentlemen in the distance. Without further thought, she makes a beeline towards them. As she nears, Alice is finally sure that she recognizes the tune.

“Hi, Ho, Hi, Ho, it’s off to work we go!” she now clearly hears as she approaches the group. She also notices that they are all attired in (albeit from the boy’s department) Brooks Brothers business suits of varied shades of blue and gray, starched white pinpoint cotton button-down shirts, and an assortment of paisley and club ties, except for the last one in line. He’s wearing scrubs and a stethoscope. She looks for the candidate most likely to help her, and selects the guy with the biggest smile. Deciding to be subtle, as not to appear lost, she attempts to begin a conversation with him. “What do you do here?” she asks, almost immediately thinking that she had perhaps been a little too direct. *So much for being subtle*, she muses.

The entire group starts to talk at once, but finally they stop and the diminutive gentleman that Alice has mentally named ‘Happy’ responds as the roar dies down. “Why I work from sun-up to sun-down, of course!”

Alice’s follow-up question is briefly delayed by a sneeze from a grey pinstripe in miniature. “God bless you,” Alice reflexively responds, then continues the interrogation.

"Let me ask it a different way. Who do you work for? What is your job? Where do you work?"

"I work at my job, because work is good. I am happy to accept any task that Wonderland Industries assigns me, and work long and hard to complete it. It gives me a great sense of self worth and accomplishment to complete the task at hand, especially if I have to work long hours. I know that I will be successful because I work hard."

"Yeah, I'm real happy," a blue wool suit interjects, scowling. "At least it's a job. I just do what they tell me to."

Alice, horrified by the blind loyalty of the group, is temporarily distracted from her personal plight, and cannot resist the temptation to quiz further, despite the fact that it gets her no closer to finding her way.

"But don't you know how your assignments tie to the goals of the company? How do your activities tie to the long-range strategic plan of the organization? How do you know when you are successful in completing your task when you don't know what your goals are?" Alice runs out of breath before she finishes her stream of consciousness questioning resulting from her management class.

'Happy' now looks momentarily perplexed, but his smile quickly returns. "Now, we must return to the assignments that our supervisors have given us, because we know that it is imperative to the success of the company, and that we will be rewarded for our efforts. The group turns and assumes its original path, singing once again. "Hi, Ho, Hi Ho."

Alice initially thinks, *Too much lithium!*" but then refines the thought to *forced frontal lobotomy*. Too late, she recalls her circumstances. "Wait!" Alice calls after the diminutive septet, "do you know a lady named WR?" But to no avail. The singing is drowning out her cries for help as the group trods along oblivious of Alice, and apparently the rest of the world.

(Authors note: I know the seven dwarfs aren't in the original story. I ain't Lewis Carroll; it's my book and Alice's dream. Get a life)

Curiouser and curiouser, she thinks. Alice turns to the nearest door. She recalls again how WR had held her badge near what appeared to be a magnetic reader when they entered the building, and making another

attempt at the nearest door, thinking maybe it was just a problem with the first door. No response from the door again. *Great*, she thinks, *now I'm really hosed!* The only people she has seen since losing WR have marched on, and her badge doesn't appear to work on any of the locked doors. She can't even see how to get back to the lobby. Worse yet, there's not a restroom in sight, and she is quite sure that is not going to work for long. Feelings of insecurity, fright, and biological urges rush over her, and she feels a little like crying again. "Big Girls Don't Cry" rattles around in her head, but Frankie Valli is not terribly comforting at this particular moment. The tears flow, and there is no stopping them this time. Tears stream down her face and she can feel her makeup melting.

I'm not even sure I'm the same person I was this morning! I thought I was still in school, studying for a test. Now I'm in big business. How could that be? Is it like people always told me, don't grow up too fast? I'm not sure I can even remember anything I learned in school. The standard deviation of a population is σ^2 . No, that's not right! Now I'm really lost. She manages to regain her composure, and extracts a compact from her matching Coach handbag, although she doesn't remember having the bag only moments ago. She checks her look and touches up quickly. Satisfied that she has repaired the major portion of the damage, she returns the compact to her handbag. *At least I look successful*, she appeases herself.

Suddenly the door opens, and out comes a portly man with a scruffy, poorly trimmed mustache. His thinning hair, cut short, does little to mask the large ears on his very round head. His grey pallor concerns Alice. After all, the doctor just left. She silently hopes he doesn't drop dead as she is standing there. As petite as Alice is, she still towers over her new friend, a strange feeling indeed. This man is not dressed in a suit like most of the others she has encountered so far. Instead, he sports khaki slacks with an apparent coffee stain, and a rumpled short-sleeve shirt. His pocket contains three pens, a small notebook, and a calculator. Sneakers adorn his feet, although she doesn't recognize the

brand. *That French department store Jacque Penney!* she scoffs silently. *This place is in desperate need of the fashion police.*

The man spots Alice, and addresses her excitedly, "There you are. We've been looking all over for you. We must have your help now!" the man frantically motions her towards him, and he turns and reopens the door that Alice has just unsuccessfully attempted, using his badge with the green border. Alice and her new mousy friend enter the office area he has just come from, and travel into a maze of cubicles.

Alice hears the door lock behind them with a certain finality. She wonders if this is a good idea, but not knowing what else to do, she continues with him. Row after row of steel desks, badly in need of paint, are located in large bullpen areas divided by low walls. The ceilings have exposed rafters and pipes, reminiscent of some warehouse retro clubs that Alice remembers from school. The walls and ceiling do nothing to muffle the sounds of ringing telephones, numerous conversations, and all the natural sounds of the people working in this area. Alice wonders how anyone can concentrate in this area. *Obviously, those that control the purse strings do not value the activities of the area,* she muses.

Alice decides that perhaps she should renew her quest for her office. "Can you tell me how to get to my office? I came in with WR, but I seemed to have gotten separated from her, and I don't know how to get where I'm supposed to be. I could really use your help."

"WR," harrumphs Alice's new guide, who now begins to appear even more mouse-like. "Look, from the way you're dressed, you're obviously in management, and we need a management representative as a sponsor. As far as I'm concerned, you're supposed to be with me, so come help us. WR and her boss can find plenty of people for their nonsense if they want. *We're the one's that do the real work and make the money.* You need to help us first, and then we'll talk about WR."

At least I feel wanted here, and this guy thinks I'm important, she muses silently. On the other hand, she's beginning to notice that a lot of people in this company look like animals. She has been very sheltered, being an affluent child, and always around 'beautiful' people. She wonders if this is what, 'getting out in the real world and

getting dirty' is all about. She decides she should try to make friends with this guy, since he seems innocuous enough. "So where did you get your MBA?" she asks. "My advisor and my daddy both say that where you get your MBA makes all the difference in the world in a successful career."

Alice has obviously said the wrong thing. "Look Missy, just because I don't have an MBA doesn't mean I'm not qualified for this job!" Mr. Mouse, as she has now mentally named him, exclaims. "I've worked here for 23 years, and started in the mailroom. I grew up with this company, and that was always enough. Now adays, that doesn't matter. It's a 'what have you done for me lately' world. Wonderland just doesn't appreciate experience and loyalty anymore. And you Ivy League pukes that seem to be appearing around every corner need to get out of your ivory towers."

Alice thinks, *I don't have an MBA yet. Or do I?* She decides perhaps it will be best if she remains silent about the degree and simply apologizes. "Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to imply that! My au pair always taught me since I was a little girl that I should treat everyone with respect."

"Great, rich Daddy's girl and Ivy League. La tee dah!" Alice's companion mumbles. "You'll work here two years, make twice what I make, then get married to some rich guy, and stay home and make babies. Then the company will have to go spend a lot of money on a headhunter to replace you, pay even more money to relocate your replacement, and pay the new employee even more than they pay you. Why the company hires the way it does, I'll never understand. Loyalty and hard work should be more important, and those of us that have been here the longest should be in charge, not whoever has the fanciest degree."

This isn't starting well, thinks Alice. She quickly tries to correct her obvious mistakes while attempting to bond with the little fellow. "I'm really sorry. I won't talk about school or servants any more, I promise. I believe that hard work is of great value." She still believes in instant success and goal-based rewards, but knows from discussions with her grandfather that she is not going to win by arguing. Given her other

experiences with people at Wonderland so far, employees expect to be rewarded for personifying the Protestant work ethic. Besides, this guy is her only ticket out at this point.

Alice continues, "My name is Alice, I'm glad to meet you."

Alice's escort seems to relax, and his mood improves. "Glad to make your acquaintance. My name is Michael, but everyone calls me Mickey." Alice tries to see his last name on his badge, but the way this dream is going, she is quite sure her original name for Mickey is on target.

Mickey's sense of urgency returns quickly. "OK. Let's get to the meeting. If you help us by being the management sponsor, I will tell you my background, and why I'm so sensitive about those things."

They arrive at the doorway of a small conference room, and peer in from the outside, undetected. The room is crammed with people nearly shouting to make themselves heard over the conversation next to them. At the front of the room stands a man about the same height as Mickey. He has a short but very pointed nose, and small dark eyes that are set unusually close together. The small amount of bright red hair on his head is standing almost straight up. Combined with his short, skinny chicken legs, he is a sight indeed. He stood at the front of the room, wildly waiving his arms, in an attempt to make his point to the group, looking very much like he is trying to fly. He might as well have been, since no one is paying attention to him. Periodically he stops and looks at the ceiling, as if he expects it to crash down on top of them all at any moment, then resumes his tirades.

The hum of multiple conversations continues to be almost unbearably loud, even outside the room. People are crowded around the small table, and others are in chairs against the wall. Chaos is alive and well here. Alice is once again in the unusual position of having the vertical advantage on everyone in the room.

"We should go inside so you can fix this mess," Mickey urges Alice.

"This room is awfully crowded. I don't see how anyone can conduct an effective meeting under these conditions. Shouldn't we find a bigger room?" Alice inquires of her new friend Mickey.

"We got bumped out of the larger conference room by some of the

big-wigs. All of the larger conference rooms are in the executive areas, and they can bump us for whatever reason they see fit, often just so that they have room to eat lunch. Typical. We're doing all the work, and they're hogging the best conference rooms, spending all the money, sitting around 'planning', traveling to exotic places, going out to play golf with customers, or doing 'team-building'. We'd be a lot better off without them, especially when they come up with the 'program of the week'."

III. The Quality Circle

Alice and Mickey squeeze their way into the conference room. The room suddenly quiets, and everyone turns to look up at Alice. She is briefly taken aback by the attention, but regains her composure quickly. *Just like walking into a party*, she thinks.

Alice scans the conference room and sees fish skeletons and flip chart pages all over the wall. The furniture in the conference room is dated, and very utilitarian. A chipped Formica-topped table complements the folding metal chairs surrounding the outside of the room. A few padded desk chairs in faded orange complete the picture. The furniture combined with the motley crew in the conference room makes for quite the unusual picture. Many of them are obviously from the factory floor, since they still have on their hairnets and shoe covers. Others appear to be supervisors, complete with computers and cell phones, although none of them are dressed in business attire. Business casual is the attire of the day for the leaders, and just casual or worse is the attire of the day for the floor personnel. It is an unusual assortment of multi-colored hair, tattoos, stained teeth, middle-aged paunches, complimented by partially-zipped, brightly-colored jumpsuits of all the colors of the rainbow. A scary picture and a far cry from the opulent lobby she entered earlier.

“Welcome to our quality circle,” chirps the man that appears to be attempting to lead the meeting. “My name is Little, and I’m the quality

manager. Our charter is to identify and correct all the issues that are making the service business unprofitable. Let me tell you though, the sky is falling, and there's nothing we can do about it. Upper management has made poor decisions, failed to give us adequate resources, and is only interested in what is happening today. No one in this room can convince me that we can adequately support this service group, not even a wet-behind-the-ears management cutey like you. However, I'm quite sure that if the general manager had prepared the service department better, and we had waited until we were ready to support it to go to market, none of this would be a problem."

Alice takes serious offense to the 'cutey' remark directed at her, but decides to remain silent for now. *I'm sure I'll be discussing this guy with the HR manager before long*, passes through her mind.

Two women, following the lead of Little, begin their own animated discussion about the 'evil company', 'management', and how they would fix the company. The first woman, wearing a white jumpsuit, has a long slender neck, but seems remarkably pear-shaped. Her protruding lips flap as she quacks away about the evil management. The second woman, dressed in a bright red jump suit, has green hair of no shade known in nature. Her role in the conversation seems to be to parrot every complaint made by the first woman. Alice is convinced that she hears an instrumental version of "Hey! Won't You Play another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song," in the background.

Alice starts to question Mr. Little about whether he took into consideration market timing before he makes his sweeping judgment about the product and service being brought to market too soon, but decides that perhaps a less confrontational approach might be in order. "Hello, everyone, my name is Alice, and I guess I'm the team sponsor," she announces. One of the apparent supervisors introduces himself, and rambles on about how long he has been with the company, and how he should have had Alice's job because he has seen and done everything, and therefore can do her job better than she can. *He probably could, since no one has told me what my job is yet*, Alice thinks, but doesn't comment, since she's not sure if these people work for her or not. *Always appear like you know everything and are in*

complete control, she remembers from her management book, *or was that a deodorant commercial?* She was so baffled by her new surroundings that she couldn't be sure of anything right now.

One of the team members gets a page, jumps out of his chair, and leaves the room. Seizing the opportunity, Alice quickly assumes his spot at the table. She's not sure how long this is going to take, so it seems prudent to wait it out in a seated position. *Besides, I'm the team sponsor, doesn't that warrant a chair?* she thinks to herself.

Two crabby older men in the back are having a side conversation. *They're really old*, thinks Alice *at least fifty*. Given the business casual attire, she assumes that they are probably in some sort of supervisory role.

One crab complains to the other, "I must be averaging 200 e-mails a day this week. It seems like that's all I do is talk on the phone and answer e-mail. I liked it better in the old days when we only had to worry about one report a month, and the secretaries wrote down all our messages. Now, there are almost no secretaries left, and they're called assistants, although they never assist me."

Suddenly this has turned into a battle of who is busiest, evidently because whoever is busiest is most important. Not to be outdone, his coworker snaps back, "That's nothing; I got 300 e-mails yesterday, and 40 voice mails. My cell phone is constantly ringing, and I can't get to any of them." About this time, his cell phone rings, and he answers, although the call from this end sounds more like his bookie than a business call.

Between the cell phone call and the multiple conversations, it is hard for Alice to hear as the people in the room continue the introductions, but she manages to take note of a few names. She smiles and nods, she is sure some have asked for responses, but hasn't been able to hear well enough to know what she was asked, and doesn't really want to go to the trouble to find out. She just wants to get done with this meeting so someone will help her find where she's supposed to be.

Mickey interrupts the remainder of the introductions, and pipes up, "It's time to start our quality circle now that our team sponsor is here."

Let me set the ground rules, just to remind everyone.” The group collectively moans, and resumes typing on their laptops, side conversations, and other unrelated activities. Alice has second thoughts about accepting the sponsor role, and tries to stop Mickey from moving on, since she has no idea what the team sponsor is supposed to do, but she can’t be heard through the moaning. She decides to let it go, assuming the real sponsor will show up soon. Mickey points to the meeting rules on the conference room wall and reads each rule verbatim. The reaction is similar to an airplane safety briefing, including the part where everyone ignores the flight attendant. Finally the briefing is complete, ending with the statement, “sit back and enjoy the meeting...,” and Mickey looks for help. “Who will volunteer to be the timekeeper?”

Where’s WR when you need her? thinks Alice, but shortly a young woman in the back, looks at Alice, blushes and giggles (“All the Young Girls Love Alice”², of course), and volunteers.

“OK, who will be the secretary?” recruits Mickey. **Everyone averts their eyes and continues typing on their computers. A new level of participation avoidance has been achieved.** Alice almost volunteers, but she remembers that she is the sponsor, and that must be much more important. She leans over to one of the female supervisors, and asks, “I’m new here. What exactly is the team sponsor supposed to do?”

The supervisor responds, “I’m not sure. This is the first time I’ve ever seen one show up to a team meeting. I think you’re just supposed to sit there, and make inane comments periodically. That’s what seagull management usually does, isn’t it?” Alice gives her a puzzled look, and she clarifies, “They swoop in, poop all over everything, then swoop out, leaving everyone else to clean up the mess.” Alice decides that perhaps sitting in silence is the best approach for now.

Little finally crows, “Well I guess I have to do everything myself. I’ll be the secretary. At least I know the minutes will go out that way.”

“301 e-mails,” groans one of the crabby guys

“Good,” responds Mickey, ignoring the crab’s comments “so let’s decide what tools we’ll use to solve the problem.”

Alice asks, "So what is the problem? Don't you have to define the problem first before you can decide how to solve it?"

Little can't let it go. "It's intuitively obvious that the problem is that Jack Hart is totally incapable of managing the service business."

Little continues his raving, but fortunately is ignored. Unfortunately, the group marches on proposing techniques to solve the unknown problem. They respond to Mickey's question, suggesting, DOE, FMEA, and Pareto. The typing and idle chatter continues, making it very hard for Alice to make any sense of the entire process.

Alice can't sit silently and watch this travesty continue. She questions, "What do all those acronyms stand for?" The group mumbles, but no one seems to be able to tell her. "How do you use the tools?" Again, the room responds with a lot of mumbling and shuffling of feet, but no response. "It seems that this group is marching along, headed in a direction, but no one knows where they are headed."

Finally, Little responds, "Well that's why we formed a quality circle, of course!"

Alice, not satisfied with the answer, retorts, "Can anyone explain to me how a quality circle is supposed to work, or what it's supposed to accomplish?"

Mickey replies, "We can do better than that, we can show you." With that, everyone in the room stands, joins hands and begins to sing, "Coombyah." At the end of the third verse, Mr. Little interrupts.

"The quality circle has completed its assigned task," squawks Little. "It was a great success, and we can report to management that we have had another successful quality circle. I, as Quality Manager for Service, will be patted on the back, and with one more successful circle, I will have completed my MBO's for the year. Of course everyone on the team deserves a reward." He picks up a sheet of stickers, and begins the process of placing a gold star on each member's forehead. As he awards each sticker, he discusses the member's contribution to the team, with such inane comments as, "great brainstormer, or "provided introspective analysis." Each of the members of the team beams with the pride of accomplishment as he praises their contribution. Finally, he reaches Alice. "Of course, we could not have completed this

monumental task without our sponsor, Alice.” Mr. Little attempts to give Alice her reward. Alice resists, but he manages to anoint her anyway. Little calls for everyone to give themselves a round of applause, and they all oblige. Little beams as if he has accomplished something worthy of a Nobel Prize, but his “team” has lost what little interest they had and begins to fidget again. Mickey declares the meeting adjourned, and the group begins to gather their toys and exit. Almost everyone files out of the room except for Alice, Mickey, and a few others already involved in the next conversation.

Alice thinks for a second about Mr. Little’s excitement about completing the Quality Circle. *Obviously there’s money in it for him*, she thinks to herself. *I wonder if everyone on the team is rewarded for participation*. Alice leans over to one of the manufacturing people wearing a canary yellow jumpsuit, and asks, “So did you complete one of your MBO’s today, too? And by the way, what’s an MBO?”

The worker replies, “Oh, no, **Management by Objective is only for management. We only get pizza occasionally, and profit sharing, which there never is any!**”

She thinks it’s odd that those whose individual actions are the most difficult to tie to corporate financial performance are rewarded based solely on corporate financial performance. She decides that it’s better not to pursue the issue with this person, though.

Unfortunately, Alice has already opened a can of worms she wishes she could close. Another worker has overheard this conversation, and decides to add his two cents. “**All senior management cares about is making money, and driving up the price of the stock. The president tells us that she cares about us in her speeches, and that she’ll get us anything we need to do our jobs better, but nothing ever happens. When we ask our managers for things, they always say there’s no budget to pay for it. If they really wanted us to do a good job, they would pay us better, give us better benefits and give us the tools and environment to be successful.**”

“Don’t you understand,” Alice starts to explain, “the reason the company exists is to make money for the stockholders by increasing the price of the stock. They own the company, after all!” She has heard this

lecture many times from Daddy, so she has it down pat. "The president and CEO get a large part of their compensation from stock options, which means that they are rewarded when the price of stock goes up. Middle management is responsible for profitability at the division level, and sometimes that means controlling costs. If you need resources, you need to show how they will save money or make more money. That is how your managers can make a case with the executives for resources."

"That sounds just like my manager," the first worker chimes in. "Right after that he tells me that I'm empowered to make a difference, and that I need to take the initiative. What he really means is that I'm empowered to do his job too. It should be his job to get me what I need, and I would work better if they would pay me more money"

The can of worms is not getting closed. Alice decides that it is probably best not to pursue it further. *I'm sure I could never make them understand*, she thinks to herself. *Besides, it sounds like empowerment is being used as a weapon against these people, not an enabler. I certainly don't want to get into that. I just need to find WR.*

To the task at hand, Alice continues silently. She politely excuses herself, stands and moves to where Mickey is standing. She begins the process of placating him, in hopes of getting some assistance in finding her way. "You promised to tell me your tale," she says. She is still trying to make friends with this guy, and people always like to talk about themselves.

"It's a long, sad tale..." he begins. "I started with the company directly from high school. I worked my way up the ranks until I was a supervisor..."

Alice immediately surmises that this could go on for a while, and can see the general direction of 'woe is me' starting. Her mind begins to wander back to her management class, and to think of how to handle a disgruntled employee, even though she isn't sure he works for her. *Boost his moral by...*

"You're not even listening to me!" Mr. Mouse whines.

"I am too! You were just telling me how you started with the

company..." Alice attempts a quick recovery, but knows he has caught her mind wandering. Before she can say anything else, it's too late.

"That was fifteen minutes ago. You don't care about me; you're just like all the rest of them." Years of pent up resentment all come out at Alice, the closest this guy has seen to a senior manager in years. Alice knows it's a lost cause, but makes a last-ditch attempt.

"I'm sorry; I got distracted thinking about how to help you. You're just so sensitive." The last remark is the crowning blow. Alice watches the words go out of her mouth, and mentally dives after them, but it is too late. Things have gone from bad to worse. With that, Mickey storms out of the room. "Wait, I want to hear the rest of the story!"

Alice runs out of the conference room, in hopes of catching up to him and continuing her apology. But it is too late; he has already disappeared into the maze of cubicles. Alice returns to the conference room in search of anyone else that could help her find WR.

"Too bad, she was just trying to help," says one of the crabs to the other. They had not seen Alice return.

"Let that be a lesson to you to keep your opinions to yourself," replies the other.

Alice pretends not to hear, but her morale is at rock bottom. She decides that her options for finding her way are better in the hallway than with the remnants of the Quality Circle. She shrugs her shoulders, leaves the conference room, and manages her way back to the hallway, hoping to find help in finding her way to her new job. Fortunately she doesn't have to worry about her badge working to exit the office area. On the other hand, here she is again, alone in the hallway, and lost.

IV. Job's Not Done Till the Paperwork Is Finished

Almost from nowhere, a twitching WR reappears, looking nervously at her watch. "We are so late! Where have you been, I've been looking all over for you! Are you trying to get me fired?" Before Alice can respond, WR notices her gold star. "How could you have been in a quality circle, you haven't been trained yet. We take these things very seriously at Wonderland Industries." Unceremoniously WR strips Alice of her award and carefully places it on her cell phone, which rings again at almost that very instant. Alice is somewhat relieved to have the star removed, feeling a little ridiculous with a star on her head. On the other hand, she had felt some sense of worth in the group, and removal of the star made it seem as if that sense of value had been ripped from her. It is ridiculous, of course, but she can't shake the feeling. While still talking on the phone, WR checks her PDA again. She briefly stops her phone conversation. "We must get you to HR immediately; there are forms to be completed. We're very late, you know," WR scolds, and motions with her head for Alice to follow. She hears the same song she heard the first time she saw WR even though no music was playing just moments earlier. Now she remembers the lyrics. Daddy always sings, "Go ask Alice when she's ten feet tall..."³ loudly and off-key to her when it comes on the radio. She can't

remember the name of the song, but suddenly she is a little homesick.

WR charges off again, and Alice races to follow her. *She won't lose me this time*, Alice consoles herself. Somewhere down the hall in the distance, she hears the faint sounds of "Hi, Ho, Hi, Ho" but is afraid to turn around for fear of losing WR again. The medley of the two songs from vastly different genres is somewhat grating. They proceed down the seemingly endless hallway until they arrive at a door labeled 'Human Resources', one of the few labeled doors. WR uses her badge to open the door, and they enter another large office area with cubicles in the middle and larger offices around the perimeter. There is a marked difference between this area, and the last office area. The look has shifted from industrial to pleasant but utilitarian. Each cubicle houses a single employee. The walls of the cubicles seem to be about six feet tall, and are covered in gray canvas. Desktops, walls and chairs are all the same shades of gray. Padded desk chairs and tack boards lend some color, in muted shades of gray and green plaid. Gray carpet and with green border adorns the floor. The false ceiling is acoustic tile. The area is markedly quieter than Mickey's area, even though the same level of activity appears to be occurring. Suddenly WR snaps "Wait here!" and disappears into the maze of cubicles. Alice can see one head above the cubicle walls, but all others, including WR's, are obscured by the height of the walls.

Bossy so and so, Alice thinks to herself. *In control of her own little kingdom, I guess*. Alice waits impatiently for WR to return. Fear of abandonment once again begins to creep into Alice's mind. *I hope I'm not lost again*. Finally, a slimy looking character slithers out of the maze, and spots Alice. Carrying a folder and other assorted paperwork, he walks up to Alice.

"My name's Bill. You must be Alice. I work in Human Resources. WR tells me I need to process you as a new employee." Bill is shorter than Alice, and thin to the point of emaciation. His appendages are short even for his slight stature. His dark hair is slicked back, and he obviously did not learn, 'a little dab'll do you.' Bill is dressed 'business casual', but Dockers and a green Izod shirt replace the discount store wardrobe she saw in the manufacturing area. His exposed arms show

some sign of a skin disorder producing scaling and flaking. Bill hands her a plastic container with a screw-top lid. "You know the drill, the restroom is over there." Alice gives him a puzzled look, which he recognizes immediately. Shaking his head in disbelief, he explains the purpose of the cup, "You college kids! I need a urine specimen for your drug screening. Wonderland Industries is a drug-free workplace, and we have to make sure that you're a suitable employee. Go in the restroom over there." Bill points with his head to a door marked 'Women.'

Alice's mind rushes to the animal kingdom again, and thinks Bill would look much better as a pair of Italian pumps than as an employee in the HR department. *I've got to stop mentally turning everyone into animals*, she thinks, but can't help but muster a tiny grin. Bill reacts with a look of bewilderment, but she says nothing. She thinks about explaining, and then thinks better of it. Alice obediently proceeds to the restroom, cup, folio, and purse in hand, and begins the process of passing another test. *I thought I would be done with tests when I got out of school. Oh, well, I needed to go anyway.* Alice completes the 'exam', and is rinsing her hands, when Bill barges through the door.

"No running water during the test," Bill barks as if she has just set off a bomb. He leaps toward the sink to turn off the water, in total disregard of the fact that he is in the women's restroom.

Alice looks horrified at the invasion of the private female inner sanctum, and shoves Bill back out the door, turns the water off, and dries her hands. She looks in the mirror, and considers completing the repair of the damage to her makeup from her tears in the hallway. She decides against it, just in case that would violate another unknown rule of the 'test.' *I'll take care of it later*, she notes. She exits the restroom and hands her 'bluebook' to Bill, with the lid firmly in place. She thinks that nothing in her textbooks has properly prepared her for anything this day has presented so far. *Someone should write a book about my experiences here.* (What a good idea, Alice!) *When I'm all grown up, I'll write a book about corporate America. Wait a minute; I must be full-grown, since I'm obviously at work. Why don't I feel like an adult? It was certainly easier to just go to school, even if I did hate accounting.*

Alice decides that it's best just to go with the flow for now, and worry about whether she's mature or not later. Bill motions her to a desk inside a cubicle, and they sit on opposite sides. Bill pulls out a carbonless form, and begins to ask her a number of questions and records the answers on a form. Once complete, he removes stickers from another form. He seals the container with one, and places another on the form, and requests Alice's signature. Bill removes one of the copies, and hands it to her without uttering a word.

Alice can't decide if she has hurt Bill's feelings by shoving him out of the restroom, or if he is just sullen from handling other people's specimens all day. She decides that she cannot resolve it, and really doesn't care. "What next?" she quizzes Bill.

"We need to get you a permanent badge. Sit over there, so that I can take your picture." Bill motions to a chair in front of a wall covered with a white sheet in the next cubicle. Across from it is another desk with a digital camera set-up with some computer equipment. Alice and Bill move to the new area, and Alice sits as instructed. Bill sits at the desk with the computer equipment, and types some information from her drug test form and personnel folder into the computer.

"I didn't know you were going to take my picture. Can I go back to the restroom to fix my makeup and hair?" she asks, and begins to brush her hair back with her hand. 'Click' goes the camera, and the flash briefly blinds her. Bill has obviously just taken her picture. "We have to do that again, I wasn't ready."

"Sorry, missy, I don't have time for you to primp. This is it." Bill takes a blank badge, and runs it through a piece of equipment. Out pops a badge with Alice's picture, her hand brushing back her hair, and her name printed across the front. Bill hands it to her with a sick little grin, delighting in capturing Alice at less than her best. Bill obviously has a future at the DMV.

Finally, a permanent badge, she thinks. Maybe this one will work on the doors. Alice notices that hers is purple, that Bill's is green, and that she has seen several other colors, but hers is the first purple badge she has seen. She considers asking Bill about the significance, but decides she would rather not delay her exit with further conversation.

Alice takes the badge, and looks at it the picture in disgust. She considers further protest, then considers charm, but decides that both are wasted on Bill. *Hmmm, maybe he would make a nice handbag*, she consoles herself after looking at Bill again. She takes another look at the badge. *This is staying out of sight*, she thinks, and places it in her purse. The sooner she is done with Bill, the better she will like it. "Can I just go now?"

"You need to meet your mentor now." Bill points down the hall formed by cubicle walls to the open office door. "He will begin your orientation, and discuss your job assignment, and our incentive compensation program. Since you are young, but are identified as a potential high-achiever, Wonderland assigns you a mentor to help guide your career growth."

"Alice, Bill, hurry up, we're late," WR calls from somewhere in the maze of cubicles. "Never mind. I must go. Alice, find your own way when you're finished here." Alice hears WR's phone ring again, and the chatter starts, loudly at first, and then fades into the din of the office area, accompanied by a 'thump, thump' that fades with WR's voice. Alice hears the hallway door shut, and knows that WR is gone.

Alice wonders how Bill would know that she was a 'potential high-achiever,' but decides that more questions will result in more confusing answers, so she elects silence on the subject. Alice politely dismisses herself from Bill, and heads towards the office where Bill has directed her. A rather tall young man with long shaggy hair ambles past. As she passes him, she swears for an instant that she sees a wagging tail. A second glance doesn't confirm this, however. It's just a young man ambling happily along. She gives him a quick smile, and he trips over his own feet and stumbles into a cubicle wall.

Alice concludes that his nose is probably cold and wet, and then mentally scolds herself. *I have to stop imagining that everyone is an animal, even if it is a dream. Slim Fast for dinner from now on!* she thinks, knowing that some of the imagined menagerie must be gastric induced stress from last night's garlic and anchovy pizza. Alice wishes that she had quizzed Bill further on the purpose of this 'mentor', but

guesses that it's too late for that. *Guess it can't be any weirder than anything else that has happened so far today,* she thinks. Alice continues until she arrives at the doorway that Bill has indicated to her. She turns to check and see if Bill is still there, just in case she decides to return for more information. Bill is nowhere to be seen. Seeing no other alternative, she moves to the doorway indicated by Bill.

Here goes nothing, she thinks. The office is constructed with the same wall material as the cubicles in the middle of the area, but the walls are higher, high enough that a doorway with a door is included in the wall. She peeks around the corner of the doorway, seeing nothing but office furniture initially. The office furniture is in the same color scheme as the cubicles. *Very institutional,* Alice thinks. *Mum's interior decorator could do wonders with this place.*

Finally, she gets enough courage to look far enough into the office to see behind the desk, and sets eyes on her mentor for the first time. *Absolutely no more pizza after 10 pm,* she mentally protests. *This can't be the right office.*

V. The Mentor

“Who are you?” Alice demands of a peculiarly tall and thin fellow slumped behind a desk in a contemplative pose as he reviews a document on his desk through his wire-framed glasses, and then scratches his bald head. He is wearing a cardigan sweater over a plaid shirt and corduroy pants, a very professorial look indeed, complemented by his green badge. *This guy would be smoking a Hookah if this weren't a non-smoking company. Surely he's not my mentor.*

“Who are you?” he demands in return.

“Why, I am Alice, and I'm looking for my mentor,” she replies haughtily.

“Well I'm a mentor, and I'm looking for Alice!” he responds.

Oh, God, this will be a waste of time, she thinks. “I certainly don't see what you can teach me: I'm going to look for WR.” Alice responds, and turns to walk away.

“Well to start with, I could probably teach you some manners, Miss Thang!” he snaps. “Besides that, you probably don't even know how to find WR, do you?”

He has a point, and I need to control my temper, notes Alice silently. *You catch more honey with flies, Daddy always says. No, that's not right. I'm so confused; I can't even remember Daddy's platitudes. Oh, well, I'd better be nice to this guy.* Alice doesn't often have these

extended conversations with herself, but she is so flustered that it's not surprising. Begrudgingly she tells him, "Well, now that you mention it, no I don't. I'm sorry to have been so rude; I'm just not myself today. I can't even remember which side debits go on, I'm so flustered." Alice cools her tone, suddenly realizing this guy is her last best hope for finding her way to her new job. "So what's your name?"

The ungainly gentleman unfolds from his chair to tower over Alice and extends his hand to motion her to a chair across the desk from him. "Castillo Erpillar, but you can call me Cat."

Oh, not again, she thinks, especially wondering if any minute he is going to weave a cocoon before her eyes and begin metamorphosis. She elects, however to play along, since she indeed does not even know what her job assignment is or where she is supposed to go. Alice decides it is best to remain silent and see if Cat will provide her some useful information, or at least give her some antacid to end this gastric nightmare. She takes a seat in the indicated chair.

"Your short time here must have already convinced you that Wonderland is much different than the B-School environment you're accustomed to," Cat remarks. "Book knowledge and passing tests won't get you far here! You must learn how to operate within the real world - a large corporation. If you want to learn about how to be successful at Wonderland Industries, you should read Sun Tzu: *The Art of War*."

This is not the first time someone has advised her to read an unrelated book and apply it to the business world, and so far she has rarely seen the application. Since she has no real experience in the business world, that is not surprising, but she cannot control her urge to speak before she thinks about the implications. "Yeah, I know. I laughed, I cried, it changed my life." Open mouth insert foot, those pumps were starting to taste pretty good to Alice.

"Cute!" Eyebrows (what there are of them) raised, Cat is obviously not amused by her flippant attitude towards his advice, but seems unfazed. Twenty new college recruits a month will do that to a 'person'. Cat moves on quickly. "As I was saying, just so that I know you were paying attention in school and not wasting Daddy's money;

tell me something you learned in school that you think would apply to a job in this corporate environment.”

“Well, let’s see...” she begins. “There was a lady from Nantucket... Oh, that’s not right.” Alice shrinks in her confusion and lack of self confidence in this new corporate environment. Her chair seems to all but swallow her, and she wishes she could just disappear completely.

“You’re absolutely correct, that’s not right, unless all you learned were inappropriate limericks in school. That’s quite enough of that. I hope that you can learn to behave yourself in a professional manner. Wonderland is a company with high moral and ethical standards and we expect all of our employees to behave appropriately. That’s why we have policies about these things. Enough about that, you’ll receive that training later. For now, I’ll assume your education will return to you. So, what else can I help you understand?”

“So what will I be doing here?”

“What do you want to do? Wonderland Industries is a wealth of opportunities, even if you have already forgotten everything you learned in school. We pride ourselves in empowering our employees.”

Alice is as trite with her response as Cat is in throwing around terms like ‘empowerment’. “I’m not particular about what my job is, I just want to make a contribution to the company,” Alice parrots from what she remembered from her interview training. “I’d just like to settle in and get started. You know, find problems and create solutions.”

“Hmmm,” muses Cat. “Are you happy in your current position?”

Alice begins to get frustrated again, but holds her temper. “Since I don’t know what my current position is, how could I know if I like it?”

“Your current position is seated in my office.” Cat decides to show Alice she is not the only one that can be flippant, and he chuckles at his little joke, quite proud of himself. He can still keep up with the young whippersnappers. After a brief pause to collect his thoughts, he asks, “What kind of job would you like?”

“Well I would like to have management responsibility, not just be in a staff position. I am after all an Ivy League MBA!”

Cat wiggles uncomfortably in his chair at this comment. “There’s nothing wrong with a staff position. Individual contributors are

assigned valuable roles such as being a full-time mentor to young snots like you. A similar role would be a perfect way to contribute to the company, did you have the knowledge and wisdom to qualify!" Cat snaps, and then he adds, "Not everyone gets to be a manager, you know." Alice has obviously struck a nerve, but for once realizes it would be better to keep her mouth shut. Cat sits silent for a moment. He begins to type on his computer, waits on a response, then types some more. After a couple of minutes of this, he pauses and reads his screen, slowly tabbing down as he reads. All the typing and reading reminds her of an airline check-in counter. Typical for Alice, her thoughts drift to the destination for this year's vacation. Cat finally speaks, startling her back to reality. "Well, I guess the assessment tools and that purple badge agree with you. Your assessments say that you have most of the characteristics to be a successful manager at Wonderland. However, they also indicate that you seem to be more motivated by personal gain than team efforts, so we'll have to come up with a development plan to mold you into the perfect team player."

Alice cannot ever remember taking an assessment, but perhaps that is a different dream. She does, however take exception to her mentor's disparaging comments about her motivation. "Aren't Wonderland's management incentive programs designed to compensate individuals for their accomplishments?"

"Of course!"

"So why is being motivated by personal gains a bad thing? If I'm motivated by personal gains, and the incentive plans are aligned with corporate goals, that person should be a successful and productive employee at Wonderland. I would think you would want everyone to be so motivated"

The mentor stares blankly at her for a moment, and then looks at her file again. "You're personality assessment also says that you're naively idealistic. I think I can confirm that."

Alice thinks back to the conversation that she had with the production worker in the conference room. She decides it is in her best interest to try to understand some of the corporate incentive philosophy, if there is one. Cat is as good a person as any to answer

some of her questions that came to her in the meeting. "Why are managers the only people that are part of the Management by Objective program, and hourly workers that have no understanding of their impact on the corporation are rewarded based on the financial performance of the entire company?"

"If you were a first level manager supervising 20 people, would you want to try to define individual MBO's for each one of them? You wouldn't have time to do anything else"

Alice cannot take that response. "That's no excuse! If you're trying to motivate people with financial rewards, they need to understand what they have to do to receive them. Profit sharing for production workers is just an entitlement!"

"Don't worry Alice, we rarely pay profit sharing, and the definition is so complicated that management can minimize the financial impact when we do have to pay. It won't keep you from getting your incentive pay. It's mainly to help with recruiting. Profit sharing sounds good in a help-wanted ad, and we have to keep a continuous flow of new manufacturing workers to replace all those that leave."

Although Alice is starting to realize that maybe the assessment is right about her idealism, she cannot let go of this apparent contradiction. "Wouldn't it be easier to improve the morale of the workforce so they wouldn't leave so fast? I bet finding out that profit sharing is a sham doesn't help morale once they get here."

"After the last employee survey, HR tried to do that, but the changes got rejected by the Board of Directors."

Alice, in snapping turtle mode now, continues. "That's ridiculous. It's obviously a big problem, why would the board reject it?"

Cat, the fatalist that he is, seems unaffected. "Because they decided that the corporation couldn't afford the short-term impact of implementation on profitability. They would have missed market expectations due to the start-up costs of the program"

"But there are so many costs of turnover and poor morale. Surely the short-term impact was more than offset by the benefit. Was all that presented to the board?"

“The original study from HR included many of those things, but no one from our group was involved in the final presentation. By the time it was presented to the board by the CFO, there’s no telling how it was presented.”

Alice is only beginning to understand some of the complexities of decision-making in a large corporation. However she decides once again that further discussion will be fruitless, so she remains silent. Perhaps the manufacturing people understand Wonderland better than she originally thought.

Cat, after what seems an eternity, looks back at her file. “Yes, we’ll have to work on that idealism, but a few years of working at Wonderland will cure it, if nothing else. I’ll e-mail you the schedule for our weekly meetings, where we’ll continue our lively discussions of how things work around here. Let’s move on to finding your new job.” Cat tabs through a number of screens on his computer, pausing occasionally to read before moving on to the next screen. Finally, after what seems to Alice to be an eternity, Cat looks back at Alice and addresses her. “OK, this position just opened up. While it doesn’t have responsibility for direct reports initially, it is certainly on a management career path. I think you can handle it. Either that or you won’t last any longer than the last person to have the job. You will be responsible for marketing in the Widgets Division, reporting directly to the General Manager. Your profile shows some proficiency in marketing, but it’ll be up to you to make it work. Go back to the main hallway, take a right, and take the third door down on the left. Your new boss will be waiting for you. I’ll e-mail her that you’re on your way.”

Alice thanks Cat, stands up, and exits his office. She makes her way towards the main door of the HR office area. She has been here long enough to know her way around, at least in the HR area. Reality (as much as she gets in this dream anyway) suddenly strikes Alice as she heads out towards her new assignment. She is now the scared little girl that went off to school a few years ago, not the confident student near graduation. Thoughts of insecurity enter her mind. *Am I too idealistic? Can I remember my accounting? Do I have enough suitable clothes?*

Will Daddy pay for a shopping spree, or am I going to have to pay for it myself? “Oh, well, there’s always the credit card!” Alice sighs in relief.

Alice exits the office into the main hallway, and almost runs straight into another young woman headed into the HR offices. She is significantly shorter than Alice. The young woman is stylishly dressed, perhaps to a fault. Her gray skirt and jacket are tailored to help mask a rather prominent pear shape. The ensemble is completed with an emerald green satin hat and orange stockings and shoes. Her wardrobe seems better suited to a fashion critic than the management fast-tracker Alice surmises that the young woman’s purple badge indicates. The young woman continues her shuffle to HR, looking at the floor, her head moving forward with each step, as if she is pecking at the floor. Alice tries greeting her with a friendly, “Hello!” but the woman glares at her with dark hollow eyes.

“Who are you?” the young woman demands, “and who do you work for?” She barely contains the tears welling in her eyes.

“My name is Alice, I don’t know who I work for yet, but my new office is through the third door down on the left. I’m on my way to meet my new boss now.”

“Are you here to take my job? That’s my office area. I bet they called me down here to fire me. The ‘Duchess’ loves to have people fired just for the fun of it. You’re her fair-haired, purple-badge protégé one minute, and the next you’re going to HR. Well you can’t have my job without a fight. I need my job. I have a new Miata to pay for.”

“I’m sure they’re not going to fire you, and I’m not after your job.” Alice reassures her, although she can’t quite picture this person in that small car. “Daddy bought my Beemer for me, so I don’t need the job to make car payments; I’m just here to contribute.”

“So why don’t you just go home to Daddy, and leave me and my job alone? I need the money, and you obviously don’t. I think you are a little too happy about taking my job.”

“I’m telling you I didn’t ask for your job, I don’t want your job. I just want a job, and I wish I knew what it was.” Alice feels her frustration build again.

“I just can’t make them happy!” The young woman starts to sniffle, walks away from Alice, and enters the HR area, leaving Alice standing alone in the hallway. She briefly considers following the young lady to see if she can help. Alice pauses momentarily, thinks better of sticking her nose where it does not belong, and remembers the chastising of the two crabs in the Quality Circle. Besides, now she knows where she is suppose to go, and her new boss is undoubtedly awaiting her arrival. Alice turns away from HR and continues down the hallway to the third door on the left, as Cat has instructed.

“I hope I can get in,” Alice mutters. Alice takes her new purple badge, and places it against the magnetic card reader. She hears a distinctive ‘click’. When she tries the door, it opens. Alice takes a deep breath, and mutters under it, “Here goes nothing.”

VI. Alice Meets the Boss

Alice enters the doorway, and finds what appears to be an executive suite. The door slams shut behind her with the feeling of finality. She enters the outer office, where an assistant is seated behind a walnut desk. The lobby area has a black leather couch, with matching leather chairs, a walnut coffee table and end table to match the receptionist's desk. The end tables contain an assortment of company literature and reprints of articles that reviewed the company's activities in a favorable light. The assistant is deep in conversation with another person, a young man, and doesn't notice Alice enter the area. Alice stands and waits patiently (very difficult for her) for the assistant to acknowledge her. The young man is standing in front of the receptionist's desk, flopping nervously about, and gasping for air. His eyes appear ready to pop out of his head. *Fish out of water*, thinks Alice.

Alice overhears the young man standing speaking to the receptionist, still panting and gasping as he continues his frantic movements. "The 'Queen' has decided to play golf this afternoon as part of her new Management by Walking Around program, even though she'll be riding most of the time. She expects that the 'Duchess' and all of her other direct reports will be at the club at 1 PM sharp." Alice notices that he forms his small mouth in an 'O' shape very precisely as he enunciates his words.

"Shhh!" the assistant behind the desk cautions. "She'll hear you calling her the 'Duchess,' and then we'll be in knee-deep. Just relax: I'll free up her calendar." In a whisper, she shares the latest gossip as she modifies her boss's schedule on the computerized calendar. "Did you hear the latest of the 'purple-badge' washed out?" Her eyes bulged from behind the large round frames of her glasses, and she shifted around on her chair, sitting on her legs. The assistant appears ready to jump out of her chair at any moment, as she softly croaks the whole story. "You-know-who convinced Mr. Cooke that the poor market response was all the new kid's fault, even though she had only been responsible for marketing for a few weeks. Now Cooke's in there convincing her to terminate with extreme prejudice, as if it's his own idea. The 'Duchess' has already sent the poor kid to HR, unbeknownst to Cooke. Teflon boy always gets his way. He never seems to be involved, he just stands in the background grinning. He's just saving his own rear end after the kid threatened to go to HR when he hit on her."

"Why did he make a pass at her?" The young man seems puzzled.

"He likes them young and naïve. Past that he's not too picky," she replies.

Alice listens intently, trying to decide for sure if the person that they are talking about is the girl she has just met outside HR. *That could be me next*, she thinks, as the paranoia builds inside her. The fact that the conversation is between a frog and a fish no longer seems unusual and the thoughts of dreamland are distant. Alice is resigned to the reality of the situation, and it seems natural.

"Can I help you?" The bug-eyed assistant finally notices her, and is obviously startled by Alice's presence, hoping that Alice has not overheard them talking.

"Yes, I hope so," Alice replies nervously. "My name is Alice and Cat from HR told me to report for work here."

"Fresh meat," pops out of Miss Frog's mouth, and then she attempts to recover. "I mean, she's expecting you, go right in. And please mention to her that the president has asked for her to be at the club at 1 for a golf game with the rest of the senior staff."

Alice passes the assistant's desk, and enters the rather large office somewhat timidly. The office is ornately appointed in a similar fashion to the small lobby area, walnut desk and credenza, leather desk and backup chairs, and walnut bookcases. Sparse artwork adorns the remaining walls. A small walnut conference table and matching chairs are at the opposite end of the large office across from the huge desk. Inside she sees four people, two in an animated discussion, with the third sitting silently with a huge grin on his face, and unusually pointed ears and a strange mustache. His mustache is quite remarkable, long and scraggly, sticking straight out from his face. She almost misses the last person, a young man sitting quietly beside Alice's new boss in a small school desk. It appears at first that he is feverishly taking notes, although there's really nothing to write down. Closer inspection shows him using crayons in a coloring book. Alice waits for her presence to be recognized. She notes the fashion statements have improved dramatically. Her boss's suit appears to be Gucci, although very conservative for the Italian designer. Its color is coordinated to match her blue badge. The man standing is wearing a blue wool suit, subtly pen-stripped and similar to one that her daddy bought at Nordstrom recently. A white button-down shirt, and yellow polka dot power tie, as well as black winged-tip shoes complement the outfit nicely. *Nothing could hide that paunch, though*, Alice thinks. The guy grinning in the corner, is wearing a tan colored, tailored double-breasted silk suit, probably Italian, and complete with Italian loafers. A cream tab collar shirt with matching tie, and gold bracelet, three rings and Rado watch complement the 'over done' look. Despite a few faults, there is obviously money in this room *Finally, people I can relate to!* Alice thinks.

The man standing and pacing, is raving, as he talks to Alice's new boss. "I tell you, she's got to go! I don't know if the product line can be saved, but her marketing plan will run it into the ground if we don't get her out of there now!"

Alice's boss, weary of the tirade, responds, "Cooke, I'm two steps ahead of you, as usual. I've already had her sent to HR. They're sending someone new, a fresh Ivy League MBA, to replace her as we speak. She's another 'purple-badge.'"

"Oh, not another one. She'll wash out as fast as the last one."

"Sounds like badge envy to me," she replies, looking at Cooke's orange badge. "Besides, you got what you wanted, and I always need a name for the 'Queen's' next downsizing tirade. I've got more important things for you to worry about. It sounds like Jack Hart is going down the tubes in Service. Before they get someone new in there, let's get that contract modified to require the customer to purchase replacement widgets instead of repairing them. The new person won't know we've done it, and it will drastically improve my P&L."

"But Wonderland will make more money from repairing than selling replacement units, and the CEO's strategy is to get people on the customer site to promote Wonderland's Total Solution TM, not products" responds Cooke.

"And which one increases our incentive compensation?"

"I see your point!"

"Besides, I couldn't care less about the old man's 'initiative of the week.' I'm responsible for making the Widgets business a success," responds Alice's boss.

Alice, sensing that she shouldn't be hearing this conversation (and not wanting to as well), clears her throat. Everyone looks at Alice, and the conversation ceases.

"You must be Alice," says Alice's new boss. "My name is Sarah York, and I'm the General Manager of the Widgets Division." She stands to greet Alice, a full head taller and appearing unruffled by the fact that Alice may have heard part of the previous conversation. "Welcome to Wonderland Industries. Let me introduce you to the Director of Technology, John Cooke, our summer intern, Arnold Ziffle, and K.T. Cheshire, the Director of Sales..." The Duchess looks around, but the grinning man in the Italian suit has silently vanished without a trace. "I hate it when he does that. Oh well, you can meet him later..." York's silent thoughts add, *If you make it that long.*

"Nice to meet all of you. Your assistant, I didn't catch her name, said to make sure and tell you that the president wants you to be at the club for golf at 1."

"Great, I had a full afternoon, but I'm going to play golf instead.

Sounds like another teambuilding exercise. Always happens just before a management ‘restructuring.’ She ought to call them farewell parties instead. If she would just manage the company, instead of always looking for scapegoats, we’d all be a lot better off.” The ‘Duchess’ is obviously distressed, either by the change in plans, or having to see the ‘Queen’. Alice can’t tell which.

“Alice, it’s time for you to get to work. I need for you to go to the CFO’s office and get this signed, I don’t have time now that I have to go build teams. Then come back here, and my assistant will set you up in your new office. She should have it cleared out by then.” ‘The Duchess’ rises, hands Alice a form and heads out the door. “Three doors down from my office, Arnold can show you. And don’t take no for an answer!” The Duchess barks at Alice as if this was all Alice’s fault. Alice notices the sudden mood swing, and hopes she has not caused it. The Duchess hurries out to dress for golf before Alice can clarify what the form is for, or if the CFO’s office is the third door to the left or right.

So much for on the job training, she muses silently

“I’ve got another meeting to go to, Alice,” remarks Cooke. “You’re on your own, kid. Good luck.” Cooke is obviously avoiding any association with Alice or the form.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Cooke. I’d...” Alice turns to find that he’s disappeared almost as quickly as Cheshire. “Oh well, he wasn’t going to be much help anyway. Let’s go, Arnold.”

Arnold and Alice leave the office area and start down the hall. Alice hears, “HiHo, HiHo” in the distance. Arnold wanders off when Alice turns her head to identify the source of the singing, and is no longer to be found, although she hears what she thinks resembles a faint pig squeal in the distance. *Oh well, she thinks, I doubt if he knew where he was going anyway. He didn’t bring his coloring book.* She turns in circles attempting to pick the correct direction for the CFO’s.

Suddenly, Cheshire reappears, leaning insolently against the wall. “Lost, little girl?” Alice sees the Director of Sales, grinning from ear to ear in a lecherous manner. He seems to have appeared from nowhere.

He licks the back of his hand and uses it to slick down his mustache.

Not me now! she thinks. Remembering what happened to the last person he hit on, she decides to play coy. “A little bit. Which way should I go from here?” she coos, thinking honey will work better than vinegar.

“It depends a good deal on where you want to get to...” responds Cheshire slyly.

“I don’t much care where...” says Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

“...as long as I get somewhere.” Alice completes her thought.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” continues the Director of Sales,” as long as you walk long enough.”

“Actually, I do need to find the CFO. Can you help me with that?” Alice continues the sweet approach, as not to get stranded in the hallway again.

“Why of course I can,” he purrs. He leans in toward Alice, puts one arm around her, and points with the other hand. Alice tries to shrink back from his grasp without being too obvious, but his hold on her is much too firm. “It’s that door there, little lady. And when you get through, why don’t you come back over to my office, and we can get acquainted. It’s right next door to your new office.”

“Thank you so much for the directions, and of course I will,” She responds. *When little Arnold flies back in*, she adds silently.

“He’s a little mad, you know,” Cheshire cautions.

“Who?” asks Alice.

“The CFO. He hasn’t been the same since the board meeting in March. I heard he really got creamed when he pitched the new incentive compensation plan. I said he was mad for trying. He should have known better.”

“Mad seems to be the standard here,” Alice replies. She considers discussing her views on incentive compensation with Cheshire, but thinks wiser of it. *I wonder what Cat has to say about this guy being a team player.*

Cheshire ignores the comment from Alice. “Are you playing golf with the senior staff today? I’ll see you there.”

"I would like to, but I haven't been invited." She turns back toward him to face him as he responds, only to find him gone.

Alice shrugs her shoulders, thinking *Good riddance*. She turns in the direction Cheshire indicated, and begins the short trip. Arriving at the third door, she finds a door labeled 'Senior Staff'.

VII. The CFO's Office

Alice enters the door utilizing her magnetic badge. The suite has several offices to the left, but no assistant at the entrance, even though the mahogany desk and leather sofas indicate a typical waiting area. Just on the right, she sees what appears to be a large conference room, and hears a conversation occurring. Surmising she has found her destination, she walks towards the oversized room. Stopping at the edge of the doorway, she sees three people inside, one who appears to be asleep. They are sitting at a huge oval table in the center of a conference room substantial enough to comfortably accommodate two dozen people. She recalls the earlier conversation with Mickey about conference rooms, now she sees his point. *I'm sure these guys could have used one of their offices for their little tea party*, Alice thinks. She notices they are all wearing blue badges, identical to the one worn by her boss. She overhears the group deep in discussion.

"We'll use our integration tools to leverage the utility of our enterprise processes," comments one of the room's occupants, as he leans back in his overstuffed black leather executive-style chair. The New York Yankee's baseball cap topping his head is a stark contrast to his navy Brooks Brother's corporate uniform. He leans forward to reach a pot of tea in the center of the group, and refills his cup.

"We don't have any integration tools or enterprise processes to my knowledge," retorts one of his companions. His German accent makes

him difficult to understand at times. This gentleman, with large ears, pale white skin, and unkempt whiskers, could easily be WR's brother. "As Chief Information Officer, I ought to know. If we had money in the budget for integration tools we wouldn't be having this conversation." He contemplatively sips from the cup of tea that sits before him, and then brushes some imaginary dust from the sleeve of his Armani suit.

"As Chief Financial Officer, I'm well aware of our financial situation. Who cares what tools we have? We have to show that we've completed this project by the end of next quarter. You didn't think we were actually going to do anything, did you? This is just to get the 'Queen' off our backs. Let's put together some recommendations and find a junior manager to champion it. That way, when it goes south, there's someone to take the blame." He reaches for a remote control, presses a button, and the projection screen disappears into the ceiling, and a projector at the back of the room is extinguished. Another button is pressed, and the overhead lighting is restored to full illumination. The blackout curtains recede into the white walls surrounding them. Instrumental music begins to play softly in the background

The round fellow continues his nap unfazed, comfortably snuggled in a gray pinstripe 'comforter,' the wrinkles growing by the minute. *They are all a little mad*, thinks Alice, *just not the way I expected*.

"Just don't assign me anything," the rotund fellow finally wakes up momentarily, "I'm just biding my time. I don't want to get involved in anything that might be more work, and I certainly don't want to be a part of anything that will get me fired. Two more years, and I'm moving to the lake house for good! And don't do anything to hurt the stock price; I need those options pumped up so that I can afford to retire." His head drops back onto the enormous mahogany conference room table and he renews his nap.

Alice decides once again that she's hearing more than she should again, and interrupts, "Is one of you the CFO?" Having overheard the discussion, she knows the answer, but decides to feign ignorance.

"Who wants to know?" pipes up the guy in the cap.

"I do. Ms. York sent me over to have this signed." She hands him the

paper, and sits down in an empty chair beside the guy in the ball cap, who she is now convinced was the CFO.

"Who said you could sit down?" he quizzes.

"There's plenty of room, and my feet are tired. I've already walked the length of the building today." By this time she is not really in the mood for the attitude, even if he is the CFO.

"What is this, and why should I sign it?"

"I don't know what it is, and you should sign it because Ms. York needs it signed. She said it was very urgent."

"If it was so urgent, why didn't she come over here herself and explain it, instead of sending her assistant? I didn't know that York had replaced 'Frog Girl.'" The CFO is obviously insulted that the 'Duchess' hasn't come to grovel in person. He quickly scans the form. "This appears to be a requisition for a replacement Director of Marketing. I thought I just signed this a few weeks ago."

"I am not Ms. York's assistant. I'm the new Director of Marketing for Widgets," snaps Alice. "She didn't have time to come herself, and she said it had to be done today. She was called to a very important meeting with the president."

"The golf game!" the three men exclaim in unison, remembering their appointment with the 'Queen.'

"We've got to get through here quickly. Well, I obviously can't sign this request without further explanation." The CFO is obviously not going to budge, and he shoves the form back in front of Alice.

Alice pushes it back, determined to be just as stubborn. "Why not? I was told not to take 'No' for an answer."

"Well you'll have to. York didn't sign this form. I can't sign it until she signs it. That's the rules, and rules are our friends." About that time, there's a commotion in the hallway. Two priests carrying incense burners walk by, followed by a procession carrying a Holstein perched on a throne. All three of Alice's companions in the office quickly drop to their knees and bow to the icon. The cow and its entourage move on, and the occupants of the conference room rise and return to the table. Alice shakes her head in amazement, but has come to expect no less from this company. The CFO notices her puzzled look and explains, "Procedures are a Sacred Cow around here."

Alice returns to the task at hand, and tries another approach. "Well, what if I sign it for her?"

"You can't sign a request to hire yourself. Besides, I'm responsible for asset utilization around this place, and I don't know if we really need a Director of Marketing. If they don't stay but a few weeks, how do they accomplish anything?" The CFO is obviously comfortable as 'gatekeeper', throwing up barriers as fast as Alice can address them.

"I just need to get this done. I'm sure it will be OK with Ms. York if I sign it for her."

"Now would an A player forge a signature? I also don't see any metrics in place to assure that the decision is financially sound. We need a SWOT analysis and a monster chart to go with any request for new employees."

"Do you want fries with that as well?" Alice has finally had enough. "I have no idea what you just said. I know the words were English, but it made no sense. It sounded like some secret code."

"Better get used to it. It's standard company terminology. I thought I was quite clear. I'm sure everyone else understood the procedure when I sent out the email about Portfolio Management."

"Well, I didn't see the email, since I've been here less than a day. Did the two of you see it?" Alice quizzes. Both look puzzled, but neither comment. The big fellow nods off again.

"Maybe no one else did either," Alice chides. "Maybe that's why you're not getting the analysis you're requesting. If you picked up the phone and talked to people instead of firing off passive aggressive emails, people might respond."

"Let's change the subject," replies the CFO, obviously dissatisfied with the lack of response to his endless stream of communiqués on policies and procedures. "Tell us what you're going to do when you retire, old boy," he prompts the sleeping companion.

The sleeping giant wakes briefly and begins to talk about his house on the lake, and ramble about what a great company Wonderland Industries used to be. He ends with the comment, "Feed your head," and slowly nods off again.

Alice is frustrated at the CFO's hiding behind policies, and his lack

of concern for urgency. “Look, my first assignment at Wonderland is to get this form signed, and I want to complete it. You’ve told me that there are all kinds of things that I have to complete to do that, but you can’t tell me what they are.”

The pale guy resembling WR whispers to Alice in his accent, “Just play along for a little while; we’ll get the form signed. The CFO’s a little crazy after he made the disastrous presentation to the board in March. Just let him rant for a few minutes and everything will be fine. By the way, that’s my name, March, Johann March.”

Alice responds, “Herr March, my name is Alice. Nice to meet you.”

Raising his voice back to normal levels, Herr March continues, “We were just planning how to redesign this process, and you can help, Alice. We need a young upwardly mobile manager to work with us on this project. Maybe you could even be the champion. It would create a lot of visibility for you.”

I can do without that kind of visibility, thinks Alice, but decides it’s best to play along at this point. Since she knows the plan, she feels confident that she can avoid getting blamed later. “I wouldn’t know how to begin to help. I don’t know anyone in this company, or any of the policies and procedures yet. I don’t even know the ‘secret code’ everyone here seems to talk in. I bet you haven’t even mapped the current process” Alice’s frustration level continues to rise and expose itself, despite her efforts to remain calm.

The CFO continues his irrationality. “You don’t have to know anything, and we have no intentions of mapping the current process. That’s too much work. Since we’re going to change everything, it doesn’t matter.”

Alice parrots a memory from one of her classes, although she can’t recall which one. “But don’t we have to map the current process, and identify the non-value added steps...”

“We’re going to do it the easy way, then make up the data later. It never seems to affect the results. Nothing ever works around here anyway.”

Alice sits in shocked silence. She has studied business processes and reengineering in school and Wonderland Industries is a model in

misuse and lip service. "If everyone's ready, let's create the new process. Everyone stand up, and move one chair to the right." They all stand, and do as they are told.

Maybe I'll get my form signed if I go along with this, Alice remarks to herself as she rolls her eyes and moves as instructed. *Makes about much sense as anything else so far*.

"Great, we can report that we have redesigned the procurement process," states the CFO. "Consider yourselves and this process re-engineered. I'll put together a presentation for the next business review, Alice can present it, and we can all get paid for our MBO's. Let's go play golf! There will be trouble if we're late." Alice's companions stand up, gather their things, and quickly leave the conference room. Alice hears the door to the office area close, leaving Alice alone.

Alice looks down, and notices that the form is now signed. *So much for rules, now all I have to do is get out of making that presentation, or I'll be going to the HR office next*. Turning her attention back to the recently departed trio, Alice thinks, *Maybe if I just follow these guys, everyone will think I belong, and I can get into the golf game with the senior staff. Since I'm sure my office isn't ready yet, I might as well see what I can learn*. Alice picks up the form and places it in her folio, gathers her things, and heads out of the office area quickly, hoping not to get left behind. She easily catches up with the group, since the big guy doesn't move too quickly. She follows them to a side exit, accessible only by employee badge. Outside the exit a row black stretch limousines are waiting, complete with drivers. No one says a word as she joined the group. Just as she suspected, no one is sure who should be there, and who shouldn't. The four of them get into the first car. The interior of the car is ornately appointed, including a full bar. Her companions quickly take advantage of the bar as Alice watches, fortifying themselves for an interaction with the 'Queen'. The driver of the group's car speeds off toward the club.

VIII. The Golf Game

Alice and her limousine companions reach the country club shortly, after a drive of only a few blocks. The driveway from the gate at the entrance to the clubhouse is nearly as long as from Wonderland, surrounded by manicured grounds, beautiful gardens and the eighteenth green. The other three passengers in the car manage to consume a couple of stiff drinks apiece, and begin to show the effects in the volume and animation of their speech. The limo pulls up to the clubhouse, where a line of similar cars have already arrived. The CFO opens the door even before the car has completely stopped. "We'd better hurry up and get dressed, or we'll be doing our exit interviews while everyone else is playing golf," he anxiously exclaims, nearly shouting.

The quartet exits the car, and Alice's companions proceed directly into the clubhouse to change clothes. Alice pauses outside the car, wondering what she's going to wear, since she doesn't recall ever being at this club. Everyone else apparently maintains a locker in the clubhouse. *I guess I should have thought about that before I got in the car*, she thinks.

She, for the first time, notices that it's a cloudless day in the mid-seventies, a perfect day for golf. The sunshine reminds her that, what seems to be only minutes ago, she was watching the sunbeams come through her window at school. Briefly her mind wanders back to

school, but she is startled back to reality (or as close as we get in this dream) by a group rushing out of the clubhouse. As she ponders her wardrobe dilemma, she recognizes three faces from the hallway at Wonderland standing outside the entrance to the clubhouse. She doesn't know their names, and can't remember where she has seen them. The three have obviously arrived earlier than Alice's car, and are already sporting loud knickers and equally obnoxious shirts. The trio stands to the side of the path to the first tee, huddled in a group, and involved in an extremely animated discussion as quietly and discreetly as possible. Alice decides to stop and introduce herself while continuing to ponder clothing options, or the lack thereof. As she arrives at the trio's location, she hears part of the discussion, and detects a sense of panic in the voices.

"I told you to ship those units," says the one closest to Alice, in a hushed but urgent tone.

"But the customer doesn't want them delivered until late next month," replies the second man, obviously aggravated

"But we have to have the revenue to meet our numbers this month," the third remarks, nearly panicked.

"What's the difference, it will make next month look better," retorts the second.

"The difference is that next month is in next quarter. If the Gizmos division misses its numbers this quarter because we didn't ship, heads will roll, and they'll be ours. You know she is looking for 'downsizing' candidates. Do you want to be on the list?" the first re-enters the conversation.

"But the customer doesn't want them yet! Surely the president has to be responsive to customer needs."

"She won't care, so I don't care. Ship them, and then bring them back after the first of the month. If we don't get the revenue, we're dead." His companions look puzzled and bewildered. "You really don't understand, do you?"

Alice has not had an opportunity to introduce herself yet, and has been silent to this point. The impetuosity of youth overcomes her, and she can stand it no more. "Don't you watch the news or read the

Wall Street Journal? That's a revenue recognition issue, and people are going to jail for things like that. You're artificially inflating the quarterly results."

Her group goes silent, obviously distracted by something behind Alice. About that time, she hears that sixties song that has always accompanied WR. Alice turns and sees an entourage of people move nearer to Alice's group. She immediately recognizes one of them as WR, although the ill-fitting business suit has been replaced by sportswear. The rest of the group with WR is dressed in a similar manner, with the exception of one man in a sweatshirt with a hooded top attached to the back. Alice thinks at first that maybe he's part of the landscape staff, but he moves as part of the group. *Guess he's no more inappropriately dressed than me*, she thinks to herself.

"Who's that with WR?" Alice asks one of her companions.

"It's the president, the CEO, and most of the senior staff," replies the one closest to Alice, in hushed tones. He follows quickly with, "There she is, shut up," to the rest of the group.

Alice notices that her boss is not with them. She moves toward WR, who is slightly closer than the president's entourage. She questions WR, "They said this was most of the senior staff, where's Ms. York?"

WR replies in a hushed tone, "Shhhh! The president will hear you. The 'Duchess' knows better, but likes to show off."

"Show off?"

"Yes, she out drove the president at the driving range then taunted her about it. And it was right after they heard an analyst had downgraded Wonderland stock from 'hold' to 'sell'. Somehow he got wind that the Gizmos division was going to miss quarterly projections badly enough to pull the entire company below market expectations, even before the president had been told. York knew the president was stressed, but she pushed her buttons anyway. As a consequent the president got angry and told her to leave the game and not come back until York had come up with a plan for Widgets to make up Gizmo's shortfall. It's never a good sign to be banned from a golf outing. It could be your last. Keep that in mind."

About that time, the woman that Alice assumes is the president

charges towards the group, and addresses the three men Alice had been talking to. "Are you going to make forecast?" she demands, already knowing the answer.

All three are immediately flustered, and none can manage a coherent response. The president turns to the guy in the hooded sweatshirt in the distance that Alice now recognizes from the HR office, and barks, "Put them on the list, the whole lot of them! Get them out of my sight immediately, or you can add your own name to that list."

The president and the rest of her entourage move on to the first tee. The guy from HR moves towards the managers to begin to execute his instructions. Strangely, he's now pulled his hood up to cover his head even though the weather is warm. Alice, suddenly feeling bold, whispers to the managers, "Go back to the office and get your stories straight, I'll handle him." The managers quickly scurry off before the hooded man can reach them. Alice suddenly wonders what she has gotten herself into.

The president's hatchet man addresses Alice as he watches his prey scamper away. "Where are they going? I need to get their employee numbers and get back to the game." The HR representative seems stressed over executing his termination orders.

"Oh, they went to clean their desks out. They decided it would be better to resign, since it will look better on their resumes," Alice lies, buying time for the managers. She is fairly certain by now that this place is so disorganized that no one will remember that the group was included in the downsizing plan by tomorrow, especially if they have a plan to hit their numbers by the next time they are questioned by the president. "Besides, she can't get rid of the division's entire management team."

"OK, as long as I can tell her it's taken care of, and they're gone," he replies, somewhat relieved to not have to deal with the problem.

"Consider it so," Alice replies, quite pleased with herself for saving the trio's jobs, at least for now, and wonders how she has actually gotten away with it.

The HR guy scurries off to rejoin the president's entourage. Alice follows quickly behind, even though she hasn't changed clothes. She was fairly sure there isn't going to be a locker with her name on it in the clubhouse, and she is not about to wear clothes from the pro shop. *Maybe no one will notice*, she thinks, although she doesn't really believe that her current attire will go unnoticed. On the other hand, she is amazed that someone has taken instructions from her, and her newfound power distracts her from her wardrobe concerns. She arrives at the first tee just in time to find even more confusion. Most of the senior staff seems to be milling around with no idea where they should be. The president, holding to character, is raving to whoever is within earshot about the lack of organization of the game, much like an enraged monarch. *No wonder they call her the 'Queen' behind her back*, thinks Alice.

Finally, the president barks, "OK, that's it! Shotgun start, divide up and go now!" She looks at Alice "Nice suit," the president snips at Alice, and Alice briefly worries that she might be downsized for improper attire. The president towers over Alice, even more so than Ms. York. Her fears of termination are quickly allayed; the president follows with, "You're my fourth. I'm Victoria Royal, and I run this place. I always like to get to know the new purple badgers, and many of them seem to leave so quickly." Royal quickly shakes her hand and moves on before Alice can return the introduction. Alice follows without question, even though she's not sure the president knows who she is, still has no clubs, and isn't quite sure what she's supposed to do when it's her turn to tee off. The remainder of the players scurry to the golf carts and drive away as quickly as they can, without regard to the fact that there are others already playing on the course. Better to upset another foursome than to hang around and get 'executed'.

Alice's foursome includes Royal, a short bald gentleman introduced as the CEO, John King, and the guy in the hood whose chief job seems to be collecting names for downsizing. Alice doesn't quite catch the HR manager's name as he introduced himself in a deep but somewhat distorted voice, but it sounds like he says Vader, or something like that. *I'm traveling in high company for my first day*, she thinks. *Not sure if*

that's good or bad. The hooded man pulls out his driver to begin play, but its oversized head of his Big Bertha now resembles an executioner's ax to Alice.

Alice sees the grinning Cheshire walk by. "How 'bout a drink when we get through, sweetie!" he croons to Alice.

"You're ruining our start, and you're supposed to be at the fourth tee. You're gone!" the president screams at the grinning sales guy. "Take care of it and catch up," she barks to the guy in the hood, preventing him from making his tee shot. He heads towards Cheshire, club in hand.

Alice intercepts HR rep before he can reach Cheshire, "Since he works for Ms. York, don't you think we should discuss it with her first?" Her misdirection has worked once; maybe it would work again, although she had no idea why she was protecting Cheshire. She motions to the grinning feline MCP (male chauvinist pig, for those of you that can't keep up with TLA's) to move away, and he quickly does, disappearing into the trees Alice swears she can see a reflection from his toothy grin for just a moment, but it quickly fades.

The hooded man quickly leaves to find York, thinking that this is the only way to complete his assignment from the president. He knows that if he doesn't, there will be someone in line to take his job in the blink of an eye.

The foursome behind Alice's group catches up, but wisely lags behind just enough to avoid Royal's wrath. King sees someone in the foursome, and motions him forward so that he can talk to him. He shyly moves forward towards King, apparently hoping to avoid the field of view of the president. Alice edges toward them without attracting attention, hoping to catch a piece of the conversation, and learn the identity of the other man.

The CEO begins to philosophize, waving his hands frantically "Jack, I want to make sure you understand how strategic your service business is to the future of the company and the Total Solution™ program. You need to make sure that you think to the future, and remember that service helps to sell our other products. As general manager, you have to think about the long term, and how your

decisions affect other businesses. You're service capabilities have to be cutting edge technology, but only to sell other products. We wouldn't be the service business if it didn't help us sell other products."

That must be Jack Hart, the GM of Service, Alice thinks. No wonder he's being so shy. York said he is on the way out. Glad I don't have his job.

"I understand, but I am still getting pressure from the president to cut R&D costs to make my P&L look better, even though the money is budgeted," whispers the CEO's companion. "Can you help me with her?"

"Keep spending what you need to support the strategy, but you must meet your P&L goals. I'll support you, but you have to get it done."

Hart is more puzzled than before the conversation, but he realizes that asking for someone to support him against the president is a futile request, even if it's the CEO. Commitments at Wonderland are never really any longer than the next quarterly analyst's call. He moves back to his foursome, making a mental note to update his resume when he returns to the office.

IX. Battle of the B-Schools

As the president tees up again, Alice spies York walking directly towards her, waving as if she's seen her long lost friend. Alice's boss has changed from her business attire to a very tasteful golf outfit. *Looks like she's in a better mood*, Alice thinks. Alice walks to the back of the tee box to meet York.

"Hello, my dear, how are you? I'm sorry we didn't get time to talk earlier," York says in a hushed tone to not disturb the president's tee shot. York has obviously concluded that the president has taken a shining to Alice based on Alice's presence in the president's foursome. She walks up to Alice, puts her arm around her, and directs Alice to walk with her away from the tee box.

Hasn't she ever heard of personal space? And that breath! Alice keeps these thoughts to herself.

"Well, the game seems to be going quite well. It shows you what a little teamwork will accomplish, right Alice?"

"More like intimidation management by the president," Alice chides.

"Same thing isn't it?" remarks York and continues. "I hope you've also noticed our emphasis on Management by Fact. We have an extremely aggressive training program for the use of problem-solving tools, and quality improvement. All of our employees are a part of at least one active quality circle. The president has placed a great

importance on implementation of our quality initiative, and we're 98% complete with our employee training."

"Yes, I actually attended a quality circle meeting today," Alice responds. She thinks better of passing on her evaluation of the effectiveness of the program. *Apparently the quality circle that I attended earlier today was the other 2%*, she mentally scoffs.

About that time, the president completes her tee shot, and turns to see Alice and York talking. She wheels towards them, making a beeline for York. "What are you doing here? Have you finished developing a plan for Widgets to make up the revenue shortfall for the quarter?" Alice notices the HR rep has returned from his most recent execution. He is now swinging his club in a very menacing fashion in the background, as if he is preparing to remove York's head.

"Not yet, I was checking on Alice, and telling her about our quality initiative" she replies, now contrite, and hoping that bringing up the president's pet initiative would gain some favor. It does not.

"Look, you've got two choices, either go finish that plan NOW, or I can add you to 'the list'. I'm taking out at least one GM, might as well be you. Your call, but either way, I want you out of my sight." The man in the hood continues his vicious practice swings, a big smile on his face.

York hesitates briefly, and silently making her decision, quickly disappears. The president turns to Alice. "Come my dear, we're headed to the next hole." Alice has never seen such quick mood swings as she has just seen from her boss and the president. She also wonders why the president's foursome continues to skip entire holes, especially since none of the rest of the foursome has even taken a tee shot. She follows the president to their cart, and they quickly reach the next tee. There are two foursomes backed up, patiently waiting their turn to tee off. Royal's mood shifts once again, amazing Alice further. "If you can't even play golf efficiently, how do you expect to work in this company?" the president screams. "You're all on 'the list', now let me play through!"

The president and the rest of her foursome move through the crowd, and she tees up again. Alice is interested to see if they will actually play

this hole, and what the president is accomplishing by sprinting through the course. The CEO moves back to the two other foursomes. "You're not fired, just go back to work. She'll relax after the analyst's meeting, just don't show your face and antagonize her." The group quickly heads towards the clubhouse on foot, leaving their carts and clubs behind in their haste to get out of sight of Royal and Vader.

The president slices her drive, and a string of expletives follow. She looks to Alice. Alice flinches, but Royal's mood shifts yet again, addressing Alice pleasantly. "Have you met any of our other key managers, like MT Urtle for example? MT spearheads all of our special projects, including the Management by Fact initiative. He's a key person at Wonderland Industries, and an important person for you to know."

"No, I haven't had the pleasure."

"Well, you really should. He can tell you what a great program Management by Fact really is, even better than your boss." The president manages to pat herself on the back for her pet program and insult York, all in one sentence. Alice is amazed, and the president continues. "He can detail the philosophy of the entire program for you. This program is going to make Wonderland Industries so successful that, in a couple of years, they'll want to write my biography, just like they did for Jack Welch." The heralding sound of trumpets echoes as she mentions Welch's name. Alice looks for the source, but it is nowhere to be found. Royal is unfazed by the trumpets, and motions to the nearest caddy. "Take Alice and find MT. I'd like for them to meet. Alice, please ask him about Management by Fact."

The caddy and Alice drive off in one of the carts left by the fleeing foursomes. Alice notices the president teeing up again, and suspects that no one will dare challenge her.

As they drive down the cart path, Alice notices that each foursome is constantly looking behind them. Alice surmises that they're looking for the president, hoping to avoid her wrath.

Three holes behind the president, they find MT with his foursome. The caddy stops the cart, and points out MT. Alice exits the cart and moves toward MT, and the caddy drives off in the direction of the

president. Alice greets MT, "Hi, my name is Alice and I'm the new Marketing Director for the Widgets Division. The president asked me to meet you, and ask you to tell me about the Management by Fact program" Alice has no real interest, but is afraid not to comply with the president's request.

He returns the greeting. "My name is Macenzie T Urtle, but everyone calls me MT." MT is an unusual looking fellow (big surprise), with a rotund body, but a long thin neck, and short arms and legs. His golf outfit is solid green turtleneck sweater, four sizes too large, with matching baggy green pants and spikes.

Alice thinks, *His outfit is so big he could pull his arms, legs and head inside them. Guess that's one way to hide from the president.*

"Cat told me all about you. I understand you're an Ivy League graduate," MT comments. "That's nice, but you know the west coast is the place to go if you really want to learn something. Ivy League is just old money."

Alice can't let the insult to her alma mater go without response. "That's not true," replies Alice. "Many elected officials, including presidents of the United States, attend Ivy League schools."

"I rest my case," MT responds, quite proud of himself.

.

X. MT's Story—Dance of the General Manager

“Well, I hope they trained you well in the fundamentals. We are very strict in our interpretation of GAAP in this company.” MT goes on. “We don’t want to be on the six o’clock news in handcuffs.”

There are doubts in her mind about the strict practice of generally accepted accounting principles, especially given her recent witnessing of creating revenue recognition based on shipping and returning product. Alice doesn’t mention them, though. “Rest assured that I understand the principles, and am fully aware of what is required to meet any auditor’s standards.” Alice isn’t going to take any harassment from an old dog (I mean turtle), even though the debits and credits issue had perplexed her earlier. The accounting concepts are now fresh on her mind. “So what do you do?” she quizzes MT.

“Until recently, I was General Manager for Thingamajigs, the largest division of Wonderland. I had a CAGR of 32% during the three years that I managed the business, improved COGS 43%, and was cited in Business Week for excellent financial management practices. I was next in line for president...” His voice trails off as if he doesn’t want to complete the thought.

“Didn’t Wonderland exit the Thingamajigs business, and take a huge write-off, due to infringement on patents owned by of one of your

competitors?" Alice questions MT's claim, remembering a recent *Forbes* article. Wonderland's stock had taken a nosedive after the incident. *MT is lucky to still have a job*, thinks Alice.

"We never acknowledged infringement, we settled out of court. Patents are just the details of small minds anyway. One more year, and I would have taken out 'her Royal highness'..." MT's voice trails off again. He is obviously a beaten tortoise.

Alice notes the dejection, but instead of showing sympathy, she attacks. "I'm surprised, with all the other lay-offs going on, that you still have a job. What is your job now?"

"I have pictures," he remarks, thinking to himself of his secret get-out-of-jail-free, but thinking better of elaborating, in spite of the ego boost it would provide. "I've been around this rodeo for long enough to know how to protect myself. The VP of R&D got axed over that one. And I have another very important job now!" MT is now trying to justify his existence and support his self-image, without much success.

MT is getting defensive, but Alice smells blood. "And that job is..."

"I'm Vice President of Innovation."

Alice rolls her eyes. Even she knows that's a worthless job title given to people that are put out to pasture. She doesn't understand why this guy looks like a turtle and not a Guernsey chewing on his cud. "So I've heard. And what innovative products have you developed?"

"Developing products is the realm of R&D. I drive the vision developed by the Board of Directors, through our corporate Mission Statement, 'Be the market leader in all our products through empowered employees, innovative teamwork, quality organizations and systems, and Management by Fact.' I also manage the United Way campaign, the employee survey, and ISO 9000." MT touts his responsibilities as a badge of honor, but it's obvious that he's on the defensive.

"Oh, you're the Vice President of Buzz Words and the Stuff that no one else will take! Besides, I witnessed Management by Fact today in action. No one is properly trained, the quality tools are not being used, and the quality leaders are padding their MBO's by creating worthless quality circles. It's a disaster, and a waste of money. And what's the

deal with the gold stars, anyway.” Alice knows this guy can’t hurt her, so she takes some of her frustration out on him.

“Don’t say that too loud, the ‘Queen’ will hear, and nothing will save any of us. The fact is, we have no resources to implement the program, so we’re making it up as we go along. She’ll get tired of it, and we’ll change the Mission Statement, move on to a new initiative that we also won’t have the resources for, and no one will be the wiser. You need to learn how to survive at Wonderland Industries.” MT is a beaten man, and it shows in his attitude.

While Alice is developing some sympathy for MT, she still can’t tolerate the approach. “That’s ridiculous. Someone should stand up to her.”

“Well, it’s not going to be me, that’s for sure.” It is apparent that MT, like a lot of other people, is just hanging on and collecting his paycheck.

“What about Total Solutions™? Are you responsible for that joke too?” Alice continues to grill.

“Oh, no, that’s all the CEO’s baby. There was even a budget developed to support that initiative, until Royal apparently revised it...”

At that moment, an assistant to the president drives up in a golf cart. Mr. ‘Fish’ is still dressed in his golf clothing, but flopping just as frantically as he had in the lobby of York’s office. He announces to the group, “The president has called an emergency business review to discuss the failing performance of the service business. She wants all senior staff in the board room immediately.”

MT remarks, “A public hanging, how fun. I knew he was history, I just didn’t know when. He never did a good job of covering his rear end.” MT motions to the rest of the group. “Let’s go!”

Alice is not sure she is invited, but no one tells her not to go, so she figures she will try. MT seems to think she belongs, so it is worth a shot. This company is obviously bizarre, but she wants to see just how bizarre it will get. She is sure that this business review will be ‘The Queen’ at her worst.

MT, Alice and the rest of the group start walking, but are soon

picked up in carts and driven to the clubhouse to change clothes with the other executives. Alice doesn't have to change, so she elects to remain outside the clubhouse and enjoy a little more of the weather. She knows that if she has any chance of getting into the meeting, it will be to return with MT and his group, and they can't get to the limos without walking past her. It is obvious from the short amount of time that is required for everyone to change, and the malodorous blend of BO and cologne as other executives walked by, that no one has showered. Alice thinks twice about getting trapped in a limo or a conference room with these people, but she decides to breathe through her mouth as much as possible instead, and proceeds with the original plan. When MT comes out with two other executives that she doesn't recognize, she follows the group to the limos, and rides back to the company facility. While MT had been flippant about the meeting earlier, the group is now solemn. They realize they could be the subject of the next business review, and blending in to the crowd was one way of avoiding that.

Row after row of limousine unloads its sweaty cargo, and the passengers make their way back into a building adjacent to the one that Alice had entered earlier in the day. She follows the group to conference room for the business review.

XI. The Business Review

Alice's group is the last to enter the conference room, which is contained in part of the suite where the president and CEO have their offices. The conference room is known as the Board Room, and it is the most opulent area Alice had seen yet at Wonderland. The office suites of the president and CEO are down a long hallway of cherry flooring with Persian rugs. Antiques, wood flooring, and more Persian rugs grace the foyer to the suite, as well as original artwork. The conference room is behind a central receptionist area in the foyer, currently unoccupied. The conference room itself is mahogany-paneled, with perfectly matched conference table of enormous proportion. There are over twenty people in the room by Alice's count, but it still seems half-empty. Mickey's observation about conference room utilization seemed accurate again. All the latest and greatest audio-visual equipment is obviously present, but concealed in furniture that was obviously built specifically for this room.

The hanging has already begun, with the 'Queen' presiding over the execution in the guise of a business review. She is sitting on her 'throne,' a high-backed leather office chair at the head of the long conference room table. The entire room seems to be arranged to allow her to create the highest level of intimidation possible. "We're all here to find out what is wrong with your business," the president remarks to Jack Hart, casually but with a veiled threat in her voice, as she looks

over the top of her reading glasses. "I hold you ultimately responsible, no matter what we see here." The 'Queen' is one of the few people who appeared to be freshly showered and groomed. Obviously, she has planned for the meeting and waited to spring it at her convenience. That accounts for rushing her 18 holes, and also explains why she insisted on sending Alice to meet MT. The 'Queen' is reigning, operating in her court, and on her own schedule. She is in charge, and everyone knows it, and fears her. Even the CEO looks disheveled.

"Well, they obviously haven't addressed the quality problems that we all know about!" clucks Mr. Little. "Hart sent technicians to the field that weren't properly trained to support the product, in direct opposition to our quality standards." The chicken is quick to jump on the president's bandwagon, although he offers no data.

"If he's the division quality manager, he must have been aware of the past decisions. He's just making sure he doesn't get blamed," reasons Alice

"Everyone knew that was the situation when we did it, even the customer. The product they are supposed to support is just in Phase Gate 2, so we had no equipment to train the technicians. We..." retorts Hart.

The 'Queen' throws down her reading glasses on the table in a sudden display of temper. "Shut up! I don't want to hear your excuses. I see no reason not to fire you right here, on the spot!" The room goes silent for what seemed like an eternity.

WR, who seems to be less intimidated by the president than anyone, breaks the silence. "Shouldn't we at least look at the financial reports? I worked all night compiling them, and there are lots of pretty graphs." WR is the only assistant present, although it isn't clear whether that is by design, or perhaps no one is brave enough to tell her she isn't invited.

"If you insist," snaps the 'Queen'. She seems annoyed at the thought of involving facts, and perhaps somewhat annoyed at the fact that the existence of the graphs further evidence that she has planned the 'execution' in advance.

WR removes her notebook computer from its case, and it is quickly connected to the projection system by the A/V technician permanently

assigned to the conference room. The first graph pops up on the screen. The president looks at the CFO; he stands up, and briefly review the financial reports for the service division, highlighting specific issues with his laser pointer. His superficial comments highlight his lack of knowledge of the data. Obviously this is the first time he has seen the graphs. They show that, while the service business is not profitable this quarter, it has met budget which projects a loss. The absence of profit is a result of additional expenditures in R&D and sales, as the general manager just attempted to explain to King only minutes earlier. King, however, sits silently, as the financial review continues. "Of course he exceeded all of his financial and MBO goals," the CFO continues as he points to the next chart, "so he'll be earning one of the largest incentive compensation bonuses in the company."

Cooke smells blood, and has been lobbying for a general manager's job for quite some time. He quickly seizes the opportunity to show his stuff. "There's no excuse for operating a service business in an unprofitable manner. If I were General Manager of Service, I could have the business profitable next month. It's obvious that he's overspending on discretionary items like R&D. Let me fix it!" The meeting is beginning to resemble shooting fish in a barrel.

Hart once again tries to defend his position based on strategy. "Wait a minute! We planned in the budget to spend more in R&D and technical support because it's we need to be cutting edge to support the sales of other products. Service was designed to help sell other products, not to make a lot of money. We wanted to make sure that we achieved the long-term success of the company, not just this business. Just look at my goals..."

King remains silent, but Royal snaps at the CFO. "He would have earned a large bonus. That was the old division budget, and preliminary MBO's. That all changed when we completed the 'tops down' budget. All of the division budgets and goals were changed, and the final version will be issued next week. He should have known they would change months ago." She turns and fires at the meeting's target, "Besides, I thought I told you to sit there and be quiet." Continuing her diatribe, "Would you be alright with owning a business that didn't

make money if it was your money?" Logic and strategy are obviously not going to interfere with her personal agenda, and no one will remind her that the final division budgets and goals have never been seen by anyone else, and everyone is still working with the preliminary submissions from six months ago. She needs a scapegoat for the analysts meeting, and her selection was obvious.

"Well..." Hart stammers to issue a response, but his brief hesitation is too long for him to respond.

Royal cuts him off before he can answer. "It's easy to rationalize losing money when you don't have to address the expectations of the market analysts tomorrow. If you had been profitable, we would have met market expectations, and my stock options would be worth a fortune." Royal conveniently forgets to mention the impact of the Gizmos Division. She continues, "Now I have to tell them how I'm going to fix the problem, or analysts and the board will have my head. I'm announcing a RIF and reorganization at the analysts call tomorrow. Mr. Hart will be leaving Wonderland to pursue other interests. The General Manager of Service role will be assumed by John Cooke. Stuart Little will be promoted to the new role of Quality Czar, reporting to the VP of Innovation." Hart looks at the CEO to help defend him, but King sits there silently, even though he has just emphasized this very strategy to Hart earlier the same day. This is the president's show, and King knows better than to interrupt.

Alice, while she has no idea why she has been allowed in this meeting (it's a dream, after all!), can sit by silently no longer. Somebody has to take this guy's side. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. He was managing his business to the only budget and goals that he had. If he's performing to that plan, then why is he being fired?"

The president barks back, "You obviously haven't been part of the real world very long." Alice may have just pushed the wrong button, and may have lost her position as the president's fair-haired child. This is, after all, a 'what have you done for me in the last 15 minutes' environment. "Because we beat expectations last quarter, the stock price rose anticipating that we would continue to perform at that higher

rate. If we don't meet their expectations, then the stock price will fall. It has nothing to do with what we said, it's what they expect."

Alice can't let it go, although she really does understand enough about the stock market to recognize that Royal's statement has some basis in reality. "The GM met his commitments, he's doing the right things to grow the business long-term and support the other businesses, why would you fire him? Perhaps you didn't do a good enough job of defining his MBO's"

"Somebody's got to pay, and it ain't going to be me!" the 'Queen' retorts.

The CEO pipes up, "That's enough, young lady. Either sit there silently and learn, or leave this meeting immediately." The CEO obviously feels the pressure from the board and the 'street' as well, although perhaps not to the extent that the president does. He obviously also feels no compunction to deliver a consistent message to the 'troops.'

Alice continues her protests. In spite of her recognition that it is not a good career move, Alice attacks the Holy Grail of the president. "If you had well-designed and adequately resourced programs to address the needs of the organization and the market, instead of the sham Management by Fact and Total Solution™ programs that your managers are running now to appease you, you would have saved enough that you could support your long-term goals and make money. Now people are just using it to enhance their own careers, get promoted, and cover their own incompetence. Your incentive programs are so misaligned that they are a waste of money. You're motivated by stock prices, your managers are motivated by silo P&L results and MBO's that are poorly conceived and shift at your whim, and the only people that are aligned with the company's financial performance are so far from the top that they have no idea how their jobs affect results."

Alice knows that she has spoken for many in the room, but certainly does not expect that anyone would offer more than silent support. On the other hand, her courage to speak has made her feel ten feet tall. Perhaps unemployed and ten feet tall, but ten feet tall none the less.

The 'Queen' stands in silence, fuming. She wonders if she is getting snowed on the Management by Fact, and secretly starts thinking of whom to blame. She begins to look around the room, but everyone averts their eyes like school children trying to avoid being called on by the teacher. As far as Total Solution™, that was always the CEO's pet project, and she just let it go to keep him busy. If it fails badly enough, the board will vote out the old man, and she can add CEO to her title.

XII. The End of a Dream

Much rustling and confusion is evident in the conference room as the 'Queen' continues to survey in silence, towering over the room again. Everyone involved in the Management by Fact program knows that Alice has just spilled the beans, and someone's head will roll. Now suspicious, the 'Queen' will earn her reputation and get the truth, or at least her version of it.

Suddenly, the CFO, who has finally had a chance to study the financial charts for the service business, shouts, "Wait a minute! This chart is upside down! The service business did make a profit last quarter." He rises, the projector is turned back on, and he gives a total analysis of the business based on his revisions to the charts. His explanation is diametrically opposed to the initial report, but still seems rational.

The man has a story for every version of reality, thinks Alice.

The president glares over the top of her glasses as she responds to the revisions. "This has no impact on the reorganization or Hart's departure. I still have to explain not meeting expectations to the analysts." She will not be hindered from her goal just because of facts. "We don't report at the business level to the 'street', so they'll never know the difference."

Jack Hart drops his head. He knows he is beaten, no matter what has really happened. Cooke is elated, virtually dancing for joy in his seat.

He is already envisioning his new corner office, and the big raise that would ensue when he takes over the service business.

Alice, of course, can't stand it. "This is all stuff and nonsense. You're just looking for a scapegoat!"

Most of the room responds simultaneously, "Duh!"

Alice begins to fume, not sure whether to give up, or continue to press a bad position. She thinks back to Sun Tzu, "Better to retreat and live to fight another day..." Or maybe that was *Top Gun*. Maybe Cat had been right about the book. She just hopes she hasn't recognized it too late...

Alice feels a gentle tapping on her shoulder, and hears a familiar voice.

"Alice, wake up, your accounting test is in ten minutes!" Dorothy chides. "What would you do without me being your own personal alarm clock?"

Alice rubs her eyes, looks around, and finds herself back in her apartment at school. "It was all a dream!" she exclaims.

Alice's roommate gives her a puzzled look. "All what?"

"I dreamed that I was the Director of Marketing of a division in a major international company, and that I told the president off in front of most of her senior staff, and got away with it," Alice babbles frantically. She is much more animated than is typical of her initial waking moments.

"That is a wild one. I'm not sure what you're on, but give me some," Dorothy jokes. Then she adds, "If you don't go pass that accounting test, you'll be the Director of 'Can I take your order?'"

Alice snaps her head around to look at the clock. The cobwebs start to clear and reality begins to return. She exclaims, "Oh my! I've got to run." Alice hurriedly gathers her books and calculator, throws them into her backpack, picks it up, and dashes out the door. Almost immediately she dashes back in, and checks her appearance in the mirror. *No makeup and my hair's a mess, this will never do! I look like I just woke up*" Alice splashes cold water on her face, quickly applies some lip gloss and foundation, and puts on a New York Yankees

baseball cap (autographed by Derek Jeter, of course), pulling her ponytail out the hole in the back. She checks the look in the mirror again. She considers changing her shirt, since it's a little too tight for public, but quickly changes her mind. *Shabby chic, but the boys will still love me*, Alice thinks, and runs back out the door.

She returns again just long enough to toss an employee badge with a purple border onto her desk. The sound of theme music of a TV show from the sixties plays in the background (do do, do do, do do, do do), and a deep male voice from nowhere says, "Submitted for your consideration..."

Alice's roommate shakes her head, quickly convincing herself that the lack of sleep is making her hear things, and goes back to her economics paper. This is about as boring as it gets for her, and she'd definitely like to be somewhere else, anywhere else. She feels her eyes getting heavy. She fights it as best she can, but finally finds herself dozing off as she lays her head on her desk...

Suddenly she sees a matronly lady in a white linen suit and pigtails, towering over her. "My name's WR..."

(do do, do do, do do, do do)

References

1. G. Lake, P Sinfield, "Karn Evil #9," *Brain Salad Surgery* (Manticore Records, Limited, 1973)
2. B. Taupin, "All the Girls Love Alice," *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (MCA Records, 1973)
3. G. Slick, "White Rabbit," *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA, 1967)

CPSIA information can be obtained at www.ICGtesting.com

233961LV00007B/7/P



The world knows and loves the character created by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*. Over 150 years later, Alice is all grown up and a freshly minted Ivy League MBA. She is thrust into the world of corporate America, much to her own surprise and chagrin. Still wide-eyed, idealistic, and a little spoiled, she quickly finds out that the real world is nothing like what she learned about in school. Follow Alice as she explores this new, fantastic, and somewhat insane world of corporate programs, policies, and self-aggrandizing executives, manifested as a menagerie of familiar characters from the original work of her childhood.

R.T. Talasek has spent the last 25 years in various technical, sales, and general management roles in the semiconductor industry. Talasek received his Ph.D. in 1993 from the University of North Texas. While living almost everywhere someone makes computer chips, Talasek is happy to return home again to the Texas hill country. Talasek is available for children's birthday parties and other public speaking engagements through his web site, www.aliceincorporatewonderland.com.



ISBN 1-4137-9681-8



90000



9 781413 796810



www.PublishAmerica.com

05-MYV-526